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Surrendering to Gender in Education? Complacency and the Woman Leader

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Introduction

In the field of school leadership, expectations for administrators have changed drastically in the past decade. In 1996, the introduction of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) outlined expectations for school administrators under a new conception of leadership and put student learning at the forefront of administrator's responsibilities (2008); this was the first time best practices and characteristics of effective school leaders were synthesized. The intention of these standards was to increase the principal's role in teaching and learning while also "expanding the nation's pool of effective administrators" (2008, p. 2). Despite the implementation of these standards almost two decades ago, there is still a purported shortage of qualified school administrators for whom positions need to be filled (Herrington & Wills, 2005; Hickey-Gramke & Whaley, 2007; Hine, 2013).

Historically the term qualified has been used as a proxy for man with regard to discussions of scarcity of competent school leaders (Young,

2005). In the field of educational leadership, a plethora of research has identified the ways in which women administrators have been discriminated against (Coleman, 2005; Marshall, 1993; Schmuck 1996; Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, 2003). Literature has also examined influences that promote women school leaders noting that successful administrators referenced strong women role models during childhood, which inspired them to pursue a leadership position in education (Lafreniere & Longman, 2008; Madsen, 2007; Marshall & Kasten, 1994). In addition to having female role models, women's entrance into school leadership is also known to be motivated by the leadership styles to which they were exposed and the encouragement they received (Young & McLeod, 2001).

Scholarship supports the notion that cultural norms and their socializing forces negatively impact the professional advancement of women (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Lybeck & Neal, 1995). From their earliest experiences, girls are taught to behave according to their gender roles (Butler, 1988) and socially constructed gender norms are perpetuated within in both secular and religious, as well as small- and large-scale organizations; promoting women as the "other", and creating an environment in which they are discouraged from aspiring to leadership positions (Thompson & Armato, 2012). Yet, less is know about how educational experiences may influence women to conform, or not conform, to gender expectations. Better understanding gender expectations maintained within educational institutions may provide a path to disrupting gender norms and expectations that inhibit women from obtaining leadership positions.

From a qualitative standpoint we delved into the histories of women graduates of an expedited leadership preparation program to explore their gendered experiences within and following certification. This provided insight into their educational journeys and subsequent employment as school leaders. Little research has been done on nontraditional leadership certification programs, and using gender as a lens added uniqueness to this inquiry. In this article, we make an argument regarding the need for the continued promotion of women in educational leadership, detail our research methods, provide findings that elucidate the process of empowerment for women school leaders, and ultimately outline the implications of our research while connecting it to current literature in the field of school leadership.

Women, gender, and educational leadership. In the area of higher education, more women than ever entered college and graduate school following the civil rights movement (Dugger, 2001; Peters, 2005). In fact,

studies indicate that as early as the 1990's women outnumbered men in undergraduate programs and equaled their number in graduate-level programs focusing on educational administration (Mischau, 2001; Sharp et al., 2004). In the general field of education, women earned 78.7%, 77.3%, and 67.5% of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in the year 2006-2007, respectively (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Women are steadily meeting and exceeding the proportion of men who attend undergraduate and graduate schools. Despite prolific enrollment in educational leadership programs, once in the field women certified as school administrators are not obtaining upper-level administrative positions at the same rate as men (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Grogan, 1999; Joy, 1998; Moreau et al., 2007; Ortiz & Covell, 1978).

Where are all the women? In the position of the school superintendency, the paucity of women representatives has been so prominent that Glass (1992) referred to it as “the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States” because, at the time, only 6% of school districts were run by women (p. 8). Since that time, little progress has been made with the latest national average of women school superintendents being 24% (Kowalski et al., 2011). This discrepancy is also found in the position of high school principal. During the 2007 - 2008 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that women held 58.9% and 28.5% of principal positions in elementary and secondary public schools, respectively (NCES, 2009). Estler (1975) contended that to reach proportionality, the number of acting women leaders should be congruent with the quantity of educators. Using this argument, with a workforce of approximately 75% women (NCES, 2009), there is still a long way to go until women are equitably represented in all positions of educational administration.

For decades scholars have examined the barriers that prevent women from obtaining positions in school leadership. Women's self-perception inhibits them from entering school leadership (Schmuck, 1976; Shakeshaft, 1989), which is partially a result of diminished self-confidence attributed to living in a male-dominated society (Shakeshaft, 1989). Low self-efficacy results in various outcomes that lead to women purposely avoiding leadership roles out of concern over a lack of skills, consequently sabotaging their career advancement (Jurgens & Dodd, 2003). Societal discrimination in the form of gendered stereotyping may also act as a barrier to administrative promotion for women (Derrington & Sharratt, 1993). Bias may be exhibited during the hiring process (Coleman, 2005; Marshall,

2003; Skrla, 2003; Young, 2005); in professional evaluations of women leaders (Elsesser & Lever, 2011; Schein, 1975); and in remuneration packages (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kolesnikova & Liu, 2011). These obstacles for women school leaders may stem from the social construction of gender, which has promoted and preserved a societal hierarchy in which masculine figures are associated with power and control (Coleman, 2005; Young, 2005), forcing women into lower-ranked positions.

Gender performance. Gender performance theory reasons that gender is a creation, not inherently related to one's biological sex (Butler, 1988). Gender, therefore, is a socially promoted ideal communicated via actions, appearances, and discourse, which vary by the culture of an individual (Lloyd, 2007; Lorber, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender norms are so deeply embedded within a society's culture that discernment between biological differences and socially created categories is often challenging (Gramsci, 1971; Gray, 1992). The hegemony of gender and the perpetuation of gendered roles oblige individuals to conform to a socially prescribed identity that uses biological differences as the basis for classification (Herstein, 2010; Johnson, 2013). It is the replication of acts by men and women that adhere to their respective gender group that precipitates the illusion that gender is organic; nevertheless, gender is socially created. For women, gender performance plays a role in the professional decision-making process. Society governs what is acceptable for men and women, prompting individuals to conform through verbal and nonverbal gendered discourse (Butler, 1993). In this way, social expectations affect the professional decisions women make (Thompson & Armato, 2012), such as the decision to enter school leadership.

Role congruence theory. Role congruity theory posits that female leaders suffer prejudice in the workplace stemming from divergence between the feminine social role and the leadership role (Johnson et al., 2008). Stereotypically, women are endorsed as nurturers and caretakers while men are promoted as aggressive and assertive, characteristics associated with leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women whose gender performance aligns with the agentic characteristics of conventional leaders, such as competitiveness and ambitiousness, are evaluated negatively for behaving in a manner incongruent with their feminine gender role (Acker, 2013; Elsesser & Lever, 2011). On the other hand, women who adopt feminine behaviors in the workplace are not seen as prospective leaders and their achievements and competence are not recognized as readily as those of men (Lewis &

Humbert, 2010; Rapoport et al., 2002). Both types of bias leave aspiring women leaders in a double bind: if they act in a feminine manner they are not perceived as potential leaders whereas if they display masculinized traits they are evaluated less favorably and are less likely to be recommended for promotion (Elsesser & Lever, 2011). However, women already in leadership positions, and whose leadership styles are consistent with socially accepted characteristics, experience less gendered bias (Eagly et al., 1992). Discrimination on this basis of gender is not exclusive to men evaluators, women also have a tendency to base decisions regarding hiring/promotion on role congruity (Marshall, 2003; Young & McLeod, 2001).

The actualization of women's leadership orientation in educational administration aligns with generalized descriptions of women's leadership, yet in this context, distinctive characteristics materialize that correlate to emerging school reforms. Women educational leaders are focused on student achievement and are perceived as caring, child-centered, change agents, educational reformists, visionaries, community sensitive, efficient, problem-solvers, instructionally focused, ethical, and are also praised for their expert level of knowledge regarding child development and curriculum/instruction (Bjork, 2000; Grogan, 1999; Hill and Ragland, 1995). The abovementioned skills and characteristics parallel educational reforms that promote school administrators as instructional leaders, who focus intently on academic growth (Riehl & Byrd, 1997). It has been suggested that women school leaders' passion for instruction/curriculum and development might be attributed to their accumulation of experiences as mothers and teachers (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988). This stance supports gender performance theory, showing that the continual repetition of the woman's role manifests itself in the actions of women school leaders, who almost "naturally" become nurturers in a school focusing on student growth. However, as women, these school leaders have been socially obligated to play this role by the gendered discourse they are bombarded with and to which they resultantly conform.

Educational leadership reform and women. A broad-scale paradigm shift in educational leadership has taken place, which aims to ensure school administrators are instructional leaders and places extreme value on curriculum and instruction as a means to promote student success (Leithwood et al., 2004). The year this research was conducted, many states mirrored this educational movement by mandating changes in school evaluation practices in the United States such as the Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey (TEACHNJ) Act (2012), which

incorporated student achievement as well as the outcomes of collaborative goal-setting into the evaluations of teachers and school leaders. Legislation of this nature demonstrated a commitment to the enhancement of student growth by means of increased attention to instruction and curriculum within schools, all in accordance with current federal regulations.

From a gender perspective, it may appear that these new standards corresponded to the strengths and characteristic of women leaders. In an environment in which women's skills as leaders are burgeoning, the effects of these changes on advancing women school leaders is promising. Indeed the proportion of women educational leaders has increased. The latest national average of women school superintendent is 24% (Kowalski et al., 2011), which demonstrates an increase from the year 2000, when it was estimated less than 20% of school systems in the United States were run by women (Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011). Despite the advancement of women educational leaders, growth is still necessary, as the number of women educators remains vastly larger than their administrative representation.

Methods

The purpose of this heuristic qualitative research study was to investigate the experiences of women school leaders, in order to explore the role of gender throughout and following the process of leadership certification in a nontraditional administrative preparation program. The concepts of gender performance and role congruence were used as lenses through which the decisions and actions of participants were analyzed. In order to better understand the role of gender performance for aspiring school leaders, we explored their journey through the administrative pipeline by conducting focus groups and then individual interviews, to gather descriptions of women participant's gendered experiences. The research questions that guided this study were: (1) In what manner do the professional goals of women school leaders transform throughout and following certification?; (2) What defining moments do participants describe that led to leadership action?; and, (3) How have the participants' gender performances evolved over the course of training and leadership attainment?

Qualitative research allowed us to examine the words, descriptions, histories, and explanations of the experiences of our participants from their own voices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This methodology permitted for vivid, more contextualized descriptions by participants (Creswell, 2009). Moreover, the concept of gender is a social construction; gender is

a concept that people create the meaning of both individually and collectively (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This largely influenced our methods because how this phenomenon is perceived and performed by individuals varies as a result of their interpretation of gender and their decision to conform to the societal norms associated with this type of classification. In the constructivist paradigm, entities are continuously shaping one another, making delineation between cause and effect impossible (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009); this is especially true of gender as these societal norms are so deeply ingrained that many are blind to their roots as a social creation (Lloyd, 2007). To fully understand this phenomenon, studying a combination of voices was necessary to gain a more inclusive understanding of the varied realities of the research participants based on their distinctive perspectives and societal situations.

Data collection and analysis. Data were collected via group and individual interviews of 18 current and aspiring school leaders in New Jersey, who graduated from a state approved nontraditional administrative preparation program. Interviews were conducted between December 2013 and February 2014. Following methodology suggested by Carey (1994), the first stage of research consisted of five focus groups ranging from two to six participants each, allowing for initial engagement of unfamiliar topics between unacquainted informants (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups invited all participants into the conversation (Frey & Fontana, 1989) and promoted interaction; observations of which were collected, adding another level of data to that which was verbally amassed (Morgan, 1997). The data gathered in this stage was used for analysis and to select participants for individual interviews.

In this multi-phase study, the second and more revealing data collection technique consisted of individual interviews. This complementary technique strengthened the findings of the total research project (Morgan, 1997) through a comprehensive exploration of the histories of participants whose gendered experiences were intensely representative of the phenomenon of interest. This was done using an oral-history interview method, allowing for the subtle exploration of participant's experiences without directly asking the research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Five women were interviewed individually, a number settled upon only after data saturation was met. All interviews were recorded and transcribed (Seidman, 2006), a researcher journal was kept (Janesick, 1999), and researcher field notes were collected (Glesne, 2006) to triangulate findings.

A coding process bridging three cohesive iterations was employed to analyze the data. After preparing and organizing the data, four coding processes were used: narrative, values, pattern, and propositional. The first iteration included the analysis of literary elements of participants' stories along with simultaneous identification of their values, attitudes, and beliefs (Saldaña, 2009). The second and final cycles grouped codes into smaller sets or themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994), found "repeatable regularities" (Kaplan, 1964, p.127-128), and brought together statements of prior cycles to formulate one outcome proposition that summarized the relationship between them all (Saldaña, 2009). Theory also played an important role in data interpretation. Feminism and gender performance were at the forefront, acting as lenses through which the data was viewed. The findings detailed in the following section speak to the propositional idea of complacency that results from women who surrender to gender within educational organizations.

Positionality. Qualitative researchers recognize that the researcher is an instrument whose background and experiences affect the interpretation of the data, but in heuristic research there is an autobiographical connection to the lived experience being explored (Moustakas, 1990). Heuristic research is an adaptation of phenomenological investigation that acknowledges and integrates the lived experiences of the researcher into the study (Hiles, 2002). This is the case with regard to this research study. One researcher's personal experiences as a woman graduate of New Jersey's state-approved nontraditional leadership preparation program, and current educational leader, were used in combination with the first-person accounts of others to determine the nature and meaning of the phenomenon. These findings were then illuminated with first-hand descriptions from all participants (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). The notion of researcher-as-participant distinguishes this style of inquiry from others and naturally added to our depth of understanding of the phenomenon.

Findings

Our research indicated that a process transpired for the participants that led them to attain their certifications, and subsequently a position, in educational leadership. This process began with a specific catalyst and was cyclical, repeating with each step they took towards promotional positions in administration. The cyclicity of the process for entering school

leadership has led to professional complacency with most women content in their current positions and only a few looking to progress to positions outside of their comfort zone. In the following section we outline the specifics of the process our participants took to enter school leadership via a nontraditional route and how this culminated into hesitance towards professional advancement.

The process of empowerment. Prior to aspiring to a position in school leadership, participants described a process in which they were extrinsically encouraged, reflected on their self-doubt and professional accomplishments, and, consequently, were intrinsically empowered to pursue educational administration. This progression is congruent with Bennis and Thomas' (2007) theory of defining moments. The distinctiveness of our findings concerns the cyclical nature of this process and its reliance on a catalyst, which consistently manifested itself in the form of verbal encouragement from a mentor. From a more global perspective, the myriad female role models to which the women were exposed and whose achievements they exalted facilitated this process.

Contributory factors. The women interviewed described a similar situation in which they were content in their current positions and did not envision themselves as school leaders, despite the female role models that surrounded them. Their lives were then transformed after a person, whom we term mentor, encouraged them to pursue first a degree in educational leadership and then an administrative position. This stimulus was the catalyst necessary to begin the cycle of empowerment the outcome of which was their entry into a position as a school leader. Their professional environment was a contributory cause and the verbal support was a necessary clause for the process to begin.

Contentment describes the mindset of participants prior to being prompted to consider educational administration. As teachers and counselors they were satisfied with their careers without a thought of professional advancement. One program coordinator explained, "I figured I would be a school counselor for the rest of my life and that was it." Whenever participants spoke of previous positions, it was always with pride and admittance that they had not planned to make a change. One assistant superintendent shared, "So then I was really happy...I really found my home. I loved it. And I never had any - at that point I was happy teaching what I was teaching." Contentment when reminiscing about previous jobs was consistent.

In addition to a feeling of comfort, each of our participants worked in environments where there were other female role models. These roles models were always women who were working as school leaders and whose leadership qualities they admired. One vice principal spoke of her role model, the former principal.

My mentor is my old principal and she provided the role model of how to be a strong female in educational leadership...She never, you know, backed down... She stood up for people and said, 'look, I don't think you should.' And it got her in some hot water at times, but she always stood her ground.

Various terms were used to title these women role models, but the gist was always the same. "She was my go-to person. Any decision I was making I talk to her about it." Many times, relationships with these mentors were symbiotic, as one supervisor explained, "She and I really bonded and she would start calling me to run ideas by me, you know talk me through things with her and she came through [nontraditional preparation program] too." Consistent with other scholarship, female role models were a major inspiration for participants (Madsen, 2007), creating a fertile environment for empowerment to begin.

Necessary clause. Encouragement from a mentor to pursue educational leadership was the catalyst that began the process of empowering participants to become school leaders. This boost appeared in the form of verbal recognition accompanied by prompting. These mentors were of no particular gender or position; their only qualification was being someone whose opinion was of high regard. The role of the mentor functioned as the necessary clause to the process of empowerment.

The first round of advising led our participants to obtain certificates as school leaders. Mentors praised the participants professionally and then verbally prompted them to enroll in an educational leadership program. Some completed this solely through a nontraditional program, while others got their certificates in traditional programs and then expedited their advanced certificates. One supervisor reminisced, "I shared an office with the assistant principal and he brought out [state teacher's association magazine] one day said, 'You have to do this [nontraditional preparation program]. I'm going to retire and you have to do this.'" Another administrator said, "I think it was the superintendent who had dropped the dime on me and said, 'Well, why don't you just take a look at it?'" One assistant superintendent vividly remembers the conversation that prompted her to pursue school leadership.

After 15 years in the classroom, there was a department head/supervisor who was actually one of my teachers in high school who said, 'You know, you'd be great for this job and I'm going to retire.' And I said, 'Well, I don't have the qualifications.' He said, 'I'll stay until you get them.' So I actually...it took me just...I did the same thing. I got my supervisory certificate.

Even husbands acted as mentors, "My husband had gone back for his supervisory – it was just him suggesting it, you should take the courses." Each of these conversations was the catalyst needed to begin the process that eventually led to our participants' admission into an administrative preparation program.

The process of entering school leadership was cyclical because once administrative certificates were achieved participants did not immediately apply for leadership positions. Once they held their certificates they were again encouraged to seek jobs by mentors. They were content in their positions until prompted to seek advancement.

I said to myself, 'Okay, I'm a supervisor. I love what I do and I'll be fine if I do this for [a bit].' Just like when I was a teacher I said to myself, 'I'll be fine being a teacher the rest of my life.' (Assistant superintendent)

Verbal encouragement was the only reason many of our participants applied for positions in school leadership.

She called me over Christmas vacation and she is like, 'I want you to apply for this job.' I said, 'Really? Okay.' And so I did...And so having that person's belief in you...it's helpful that you have somebody say to you, you are so ready to do this, you can do it. (District supervisor)

She was like 'excellent go back,' and always pushing me, I mean even now still there's a principalship at a big high school that came up here. She's like, 'Apply.' I'm like, 'I don't know.' [Her mentor says] 'No you should, you are good.' So of course I applied. (Vice principal)

Regardless of their position, these mentors played the essential role of inspiring participants to enter school leadership. Without advisement and the availability of a nontraditional preparation program, participants felt they may not have ever taken the step into administration because they were content in their positions and were insecure regarding their ability to perform in an advanced position.

Self-doubt. Encouragement acted as a necessary clause for participants to enter school leadership because of participants' insecurity regarding their professional abilities. However, their descriptions of the trajectory from applying for jobs and current roles evidenced ongoing self-doubt. Myriad excuses were given by participants as to why they were neither the best candidates for positions, nor prepared for administrative jobs.

Insecurity manifested itself in unjustified rationale. Lack of professional experience was one reason women recognized – they did not feel prepared for administration. One participant said, “I actually don’t know that I would have gone and applied in other districts at that point in time anyway and I was pretty inexperienced.” Another said, “It’s only my sixth year here. That’s not long.” Self-doubt took many forms yet the outcome was the same, a self-perception in which women did not feel suited to be school leaders.

I am not a dynamic, visionary leader. I am a good worker bee and I know that about myself and it doesn't mean that I don't have a vision, but I am really good at, you know, here's what we need to do let's break it down in subsets and do it. (Supervisor)

Participant's self-descriptions revealed they felt better suited for supportive rather than leadership roles. One woman, who is now a high school principal, said, “I considered myself more of real strong support person. So flying by the front seat as principal was, wow!” Insecurity acted as an internal barrier for our participants (Shakeshaft, 1989).

Along the same lines as experience, many participants shunned positions that were more administrative and less supervisory because they felt that their professional strengths were not suited to the principalship or the superintendency. Participants' focus on curriculum and instruction influenced their self-perception and resultantly their confidence in holding certain administrative positions. One supervisor said, “I don't think I'm cut out for administration. I really like curriculum.” Another echoed this sentiment of insecurity, “I couldn't possible know enough to run the whole school system. I think with my experience as a curriculum supervisor, I could totally run the whole curriculum piece.” When asked about advancement to a principalship or superintendency one supervisor said, “I think right now my job is so very focused on the curriculum that I don't have, I don't have the balance of experience you need to do the operational and the finance side.” Ironically, after making this statement, we had a conversation about how she just finished her budget and was going to cut it with the business administrator. Self-doubt

obstructed advancement into top leadership positions; yet once the catalyst was introduced, insecurities were overcome by self-empowerment. Many of the participants also contacted us post-interview to explain how empowering our focus group was to them – a sentiment that was echoed by the researchers as well.

Empowerment. The final phase of the process to entering school leadership was self-empowerment. After being advised to consider a professional advancement and recognizing their self-doubt, participants described a stage of reflection in which their professional accomplishments were contemplated. From this reflection they acknowledged the characteristics they embody that align with educational leadership. One assistant principal elucidated, “I subconsciously gave myself that empowerment that I could make some changes.”

A self-inventory of professional achievements was very motivating and inspiring. Some participants physically scribed their activities and successes, an inspiring act.

It was great to sit down and see everything I’d done as “only a teacher.” I had taken advantage of any opportunity my district offered to serve on a committee. I was a co-writer for an international studies magnet program... (Supervisor)

I’ve gone onto Google docs and I have tried to list. It’s difficult to do because of all the other stuff that you have going on during the day, but list all the tasks that I do on a daily basis... And then go back and say what’s administrative, what’s supervisory and right on down the list. (District supervisor)

For other participants, this process was not as literal, but still occurred. Participants acknowledged this process of empowerment and were able to describe the motivation of reflecting on their professional practice.

For some participants, the process of empowerment occurred, but not as methodically. These women identified their thought process in a subtler manner. One principal explains how she realized she was already a school leader, just without the title, “I sort of was like a lead teacher without trying. People would come and say, ‘I’m trying to teach this. How did you do that?’ [I’d say,] ‘Here take this, take that.’ I’m not territorial.” At times specific experiences helped build confidence. One supervisor remarked, “My principals really gave me a lot of opportunity. I helped with the budget construction, a small little bit, but it gave me that experience.” Elucidation of professional experiences was empowering.

This outcome of this empowerment process was that each participant was imbued with the confidence necessary to take action towards working in educational leadership. As participants explained, "You see yourself differently." After recognizing their qualifications, a participant noted, "[I] started to think over time that I probably had something to bring to the table...things change and you see yourself differently." One supervisor that was interviewed best summarized this process of empowerment: "You take those incremental small steps that when you look at them individually don't seem like they had anything to do with me becoming a school leader but they really did." In essence, this stage was empowering because participants were able to acknowledge all of their accomplishments, which together painted a picture of school leadership.

Ultimately, women who were empowered to become administrators were thriving in their positions. One vice principal stated, "I'm actually enjoying the administration, which everybody has always told me that I should do but I always said, 'No, I'm really a curriculum person.' So I still am geared to curriculum." Another shared her self-doubt and transformation.

It wasn't my goal to be like an administrator for whatever reason. I just don't think I saw myself that way. I just would have never envisioned it.... Then all of a sudden I was doing it and I'm like, "What am I crazy?" I mean, it was really hard at first but then it wasn't.

One supervisor shared, "I struggled with like the challenges of entering school leadership...I think the biggest challenge was my own insecurity and can I really do this?" Confidence and low self-perception contributed to the need for a mentor to begin the process of empowerment, inclusive of recognizing that insecurity was an inhibiting factor. As we discuss shortly, once empowered to enter school leadership, our participants became content, and complacent, in their administrative positions, and thus there was a need to restart the empowerment process.

Paying it forward. In addition to being mentored, our participants repeated the cycle of empowerment with others. Interviewees mentioned friends and colleagues who they prompted to consider educational leadership and who answered the call. A vice principal said, "One of my teachers is doing it in the northern [leadership preparation] cohort right now and I am his mentor." Some participants recognized that they had inspired many people. "There were four teachers who had gone through the program that I mentored." The desire to act as a mentor for other women was deliberate.

[I try to] pay it forward in my students...I have invested and try to support. People ask me, "Why are you doing this?" And I said, "A lot of people worked really hard for a lot of years to give me a great situation to be a great teacher and I want to do that for other people"

Perpetuating the process of empowerment was manifested in the encouragement of others to enter the field of educational administration. In some ways encouragement was not intentional, but the result of role modeling behavior. "They never had anybody from my district and now one of the people who worked for me just finished." Participants as a whole felt compelled to develop others, if not as school leaders then as professionals, a finding that suggests the cycle of women being encouraged and entering school leadership will continue.

Professional complacency. Contentment in positions and apprehension of upper-administrative positions influenced participant's professional aspirations. Interviewees expressed satisfaction with their current job, similar to when they were teaching/counseling, which continued to prevent them from seeking promotional positions. Excuses, such as those discussed, contributed to participants' avoidance of upper-level administrative positions. This situation mirrors the initial findings, where a catalyst will be necessary to encourage these women to pursue higher levels of school leadership.

Our participants expressed happiness, a common progenitor of contentment, at working in administrative positions that they initially eschewed, and served as a reason women did not have aspirations to advance professionally.

I just went as a teaching supervisor. I had no desire to be in upper admin. and I think part was that I did have a great mentor and I clicked with her and we were doing a lot of good work. I mean we [were] doing a lot of good work with the teachers, a lot of – it was just a real open environment, very thriving. (Vice principal)

I do enjoy teaching, however, I know I'm making a difference as a supervisor because when they did a moving around of all the different disciplines they will not take the art and music people away from me because they are very pleased that there is a structure there that they never had before. (District supervisor)

This satisfaction negatively impacted our participants' desire for professional advancement; they continue to find happiness in their upgraded positions, hence the need for continued external catalysts for motivation.

Overall, our participants did not aspire to the chief school administrator position. “I don’t know if I’d ever want to be a superintendent, which maybe gets into somehow why men get more jobs because I didn’t see myself in that position.” Most of our participants desired to maintain their current role or seek a position as a professor, supervisor/director, or assistant of some sort. When first asked, the response was oftentimes, “I don’t know where I want to be. I don’t know what I want to be doing.” When urged, responses were more concrete: “I want to teach biology to rock heads at the community college. That’s all I want to do” and “I would ultimately like a position [in] central administration, not a superintendent. I guess the furthest I’m thinking [is] maybe assistant superintendent.” The pattern of responses was clear, with our participants seeing themselves in positions that do not require them to be the ultimate decision-maker. They are defaulting to jobs aligned with their current positions and perhaps prescribed gender roles, such as support positions, but rarely strive for positions outside their comfort zone, such as the superintendency.

These downgraded professional aspirations, and the need for professional motivation from a mentor, have created a culture of complacency in which our participants do not seek positions without external motivation. Since so many women did not aspire to the chief school administrator position, we asked specifically about the possibility of seeking a principalship or superintendent position.

I’m not ambitious to get to the top but I’m competitive so there is a little bit of both. I’m not looking to be at the dais, like the director making the decisions. That actually makes me a little uncomfortable. (Supervisor)

It’s nice to just be able to say, ‘You still have an issue? If our five conversations haven’t cleared things up, you’re probably going to want to contact the principal. He’s aware of the situation and he knows the steps I’ve taken throughout this process. Here’s his number.’ That is kind of nice. I try not to do that, but it is nice. There is a plus to being an assistant. (Assistant principal)

One supervisor, who was in the process of obtaining her superintendent certification during our interviews did not aspire to the position. She said, “I want the certificate because I took the test, I want the certificate but I don’t necessarily ever want the job.” Interviewees sought certifications, and were successful as school leaders yet they were still hesitant to advance professionally. They took pride in their accomplishments and were content with their professional lives regardless of their positions. “They

call me doctor at work, and I love it. Some of the kids are like, ‘You are a doctor?’ And I am like, ‘I am and I’m proud to still be a teacher.’ It’s okay that I am a doctor and I’m a teacher.” The abovementioned cycle continues despite the fact that our participants are now school leaders; they still require encouragement to move up the proverbial ladder.

Discussion

Scholarship surrounding the topic of women in educational leadership is diverse and extensive, however, this study contributes to the scholarship through its analysis of women participating in both traditional and non-traditional administrative preparation programs. Traditional graduate-level programs and their influence on advancing women in the field of school leadership have conventionally been investigated. Our findings indicated the women in our study only decided to enter school leadership after receiving encouragement from a mentor and participating in a cycle of self-empowerment, of which participants felt that an expedited program would fit into their lifestyles. Moreover, their professional contentment made continual encouragement to pursue leadership positions a necessity.

Our participants each experienced a defining moment that was the catalyst for them to pursue careers as school leaders. Previous research concerning defining moments illustrates an initial process similar to what was unveiled in this inquiry (Bennis & Thomas, 2007). Avolio and Luthans (2006) describe this as a “leadership development jolt” that generates a process in which core values are assessed, self-confidence improves, and from which leadership-centered action follows (p. 11). Research on defining moments emphasizes that one particular event leads to a process of empowerment and action into leadership. The cyclicity of the process we discovered is novel. Several defining moments were necessary for the career advancement for our participants. Mentors encouraged these women to enroll in a program. Then, despite having obtained certifications, advisement from another mentor was necessary prior to applying for positions in school leadership. This repeated for each step in the participant’s careers as school leaders. Dahlgvig and Longman (2010) posit that pivotal moments can be transformational experiences from which leaders are formed; using this description, all leadership development programs undeniably meet the criteria by assisting in the promotion of women school leaders.

The diversity of individuals who served as mentors to our participants during defining moments was also notable. Although role models that the women described were all women, the mentors that prompted them to

enter a program in school leadership, and professional positions were of both genders. Prior research has indicated that women need like role models (Madsen, 2007), but barely speaks to the nature of the defining moments women experience. In this regard, our data showed consistency in the catalyst that acted as the defining moment, and that sparked an interest and pursuit of educational leadership certificates/positions, of which gender and position were not important. In light of the context and sample size, this will need to be correlated with further research; nonetheless, for our participants there was no variation in this regard. The encouragement of a mentor, man or woman, was the necessary clause for them to consider a career in school leadership.

The need for assurance from a mentor and the recurrent nature of the process of empowerment speak to the role of gender performance on aspiring women in school leadership. From a gender performance perspective, the encouragement from a mentor is akin to receiving permission from a member of the dominant group to stray from an assigned role. By obtaining consent to pursue school leadership, our participants were unintentionally reproducing socially established gender roles. According to Butler (1988), gender is the performance of a series of acts; and with each recurrence of a defining moment and subsequent process of empowerment, women consciously broke the repetitiveness of their feminized gender performances. As our findings elucidated, once working as school leaders our participants returned to their traditional gender performances, being satisfied in subordinate positions and focusing on areas that fall within their established gender roles such as curriculum/instruction. This is consistent with other scholarship in school leadership and explains why there is a lower proportion of women in managerial-type school roles (i.e. principal, superintendent) as compared to other leadership positions (Moreau et al., 2007). This adherence to gender norms permeated the professional aspirations of our interviewees who shunned top-level positions, preferring to aim for supportive roles rather than building or district management.

The process of empowerment impacted gender performance by promoting acts of “temporal duration” (Butler, 1988, p. 525), such as enrollment in a leadership program, yet it did little to transform the overall gender performances of our participants. This change process is one that Weick and Quinn (1999) would describe as episodic. Within the educational leadership development context, instances of sporadic and infrequent changes to gender performance were followed by a period of equilibrium in which gender roles were adhered to until interrupted again by a mentor. With this in mind, it is possible that the purported aspirations

of our study's participants are downgraded due to their period of stability, which after interruption by a mentor, could be transformed long enough for them to pursue a previously eschewed upper-level position. The overall lack of a drive towards professional advancement led to our description of women school leaders as complacent, content in their positions with little self-aspiration for promotion.

Promotion of women in the field is occurring naturally. Our participants themselves shared how they are perpetuating the cycle of empowerment through mentoring others. The impact of this mentoring is evidenced in our data, since each of our participants was prompted to enroll in the program through a mentor, many of whom were graduates of the nontraditional program themselves.

The findings we detailed and discuss in the previous sections represent the responses, experiences, and sentiments of the large majority of the research participants. However, it should be noted that there was an occasional outlier, most often found within focus groups, whose experiences were not aligned with the common experiences of other interviewees. For example, several women interviewed were no longer caretakers because as they entered school leadership when their children were older, while another never had a traditional family. Because intensity samples were selected for individual interviews, the administrative journeys of participants in the second research phase were more aligned. While all participants' voices are honored here they were not always reported due to small incongruences compared to the generalized experiences of the larger group. These outliers can provide opportunities for future studies that are not oriented towards the establishment of common experiences. As researchers we do not feel that the presence of negative cases retracts from the findings, instead they create more questions that we seek to answer.

Implications

The key findings of our study have outlined how women working in the field of education were prompted to enter school leadership. The process through which they cycled in order to first enroll in an administrative preparation program and then to pursue positions as leaders communicates the ways in which our efforts need to be focused to promote women as educational administrators. The single most important factor that prompted our participants to enter school leadership was the encouragement of a mentor. One verbal suggestion from a professional, with whom our participants worked and respected, was enough to begin

the process of empowerment leading to their enrollment in a certification program. On a practical level, our recommendation is therefore to make a conscious effort to encourage women educators to pursue educational administration. This is the catalyst that is necessary for women to consider this professional route and thus it is necessary to begin their journey into the field. To formalize this process of encouragement, creating a non-official mentoring process for women who exhibit the characteristics of a good leader is suggested. In this process, getting women educators involved with various aspects of school as teacher-leaders, through practical experiences such as committee work, and then verbally encouraging them to consider administration as a career path is advocated. Women need this verbal prompting, making our proposal simple yet vital.

Our participants' stories also gave insight into the role a nontraditional administrative preparation programs served in certifying working women school leaders. Scholarship in this area is scarce, and that which is available is descriptive in nature or investigates the professional outcomes of program participants (Anthes, 2004; Hecht et al., 2000). Hickey-Gramke and Whaley (2007) stated that alternative principal licensure programs needed more critical examination, and the paucity of literature on the topic indicates that this statement is true today. Is there a connection between nontraditional programs and the advancement of women school leaders? It is suggested that the outcomes of nontraditional programs be evaluated to discern their role in the advancement of women administrators.

Conclusion

This study reinforced and advanced research done regarding the experiences that impel women to pursue positions in school leadership. An examination of gender performances for women school leaders revealed how social norms influenced their professional decisions, even those in seemingly nontraditional roles. A transformation of gender performance was not evidenced in this study, but intervals of episodic change in this regard were. Short periods of relief from gender roles resulted from the cyclical process of defining moments that motivated women to pursue employment in a field that they hitherto had not considered. Adding to this analytical lens of gender performance were the experiences of school leaders in a nontraditional administrative preparation program. Additional empirical evidence would be necessary to show a connection between the advancement of women and nontraditional programs. Our data also showed

that women in the field of educational leadership are intentionally propagating future women leaders by acting as “mentors” and continuing the cycle of empowerment towards leadership action.

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