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1-1-2005

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Abstract: *Women have been involved in leadership activities throughout the history of the United States. Not always called leadership, their capacities to deal with difficult situations, and to manage enterprises have earned them the reputation of being strong and resilient, capable of great initiative. This article draws briefly on this history to situate a discussion of how women are shaping the most powerful position in U.S. education – the superintendency. Using published findings from the AASA (2003) national survey of women superintendents and central office administrators, conducted by Margaret Grogan and Cryss Brunner, the article argues that women are still seen as somewhat of an anomaly in the position, and that a collaborative effort must be made by all those involved to bring about real change.*

U. S. women have a history of leading in ways that have not always been labeled "leadership." The women who were instrumental in managing their families and property while their men folk went to war or while their husbands and fathers learned how to govern the country are excellent examples of this. So too, are the women who accompanied husbands and family members on their early expeditions out West, rebuilding a home life and finding the strength to keep going in times of great economic adversity. And the African-American women who fought to bring themselves and their families out of slavery showed that leadership was a private, domestic enterprise as well as a highly risky public one. The United States is founded on stories of white women and women of color whose work to manage a home and family affairs has never been described as leadership, though it was crucial to the survival and success of all.

As a prelude to the following discussion of contemporary women in the highest public position in education, it is appropriate to look back briefly at what women in the United States have been known for in the past. While not being able to do justice to an extensive conversation on historical events and periods, a glimpse of how women managed the lives and affairs of those entrusted to them reflects the modern notion of leadership and begs the question of why there are still so few women superintendents in the early 21st century. I argue that U.S. women have always been 'leaders' in the sense that their managing of diverse people and unpredictable events is leadership just as it is leadership for men to navigate the unknown and often treacherous waters of settling in strange lands and dealing with conditions of war. Perhaps because what women were doing was not elevated to the level of leadership, in the sense that managing and problem-solving are not leadership, women were not seen as leaders and did not think of themselves as leaders – at least in the traditional sense.

A few stories of individual women in 18th and 19th century North America will help to illustrate the point. First, from the upper classes, we hear of white Anglo women bred into the social ranks of those who should have been engaged in domestic duties, rearing families and entertaining men. But, in the early days of fighting for independence from England and carving out a new nation, they took on much more.

Cokie Roberts (2004) writes about the women who worked both behind the scenes and in

public to support their husbands and fathers as they founded the country. Calling them the founding mothers, she tells of how Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, Sarah Livingston Jay, Eliza Pinckney and Deborah Read Franklin, among others, performed tasks that are certainly enfolded into the concept of modern day "leadership." Eliza Pinckney, for instance, when her father went back to England, "was left in charge of three plantations in South Carolina at the tender age of sixteen .... Among her many accomplishments was the successful cultivation of indigo in South Carolina, which provided a [significant] source of income to the Mother Country" (p. xvii). A similar example is Deborah Read Franklin. Ben Franklin left the United States for Europe for many periods of his public life including for stretches as long as sixteen years. During all this time, his wife was left to defend the property against mobs angry with Ben for his politics, manage the postal service, and supervise all of Franklin's real estate ventures. During eight years of war, Martha Washington went with George to camp. She nursed the troops, sewed clothes for them, and talked them out of deserting. At the same time, she kept up the Washington residence attending to the public there.

> [W]omen ventured into all kinds of spheres. They went with soldiers to camp. They served as spies. They organized boycotts of British goods. They raised money for the troops. They petitioned the government. As the Daughters of Liberty, they formed a formidable force. They defended their homesteads alone as their husbands hid out, marked men with a price on their heads. … And all the while the women were bearing and burying and rearing children. (Roberts, 2004, p. xix.)

Not only a manifestation of leadership associated with war, women's duties and responsibilities in the newly formed United States thrust them out of their domestic comfort zones in multiple ways. During the nineteenth century Western Expansion, white women (whether they chose to or not) often found themselves accompanying husbands, fathers, and brothers on journeys to unknown places where they were supposed to bring the necessary civilizing social structures. These women were privileged by race, class and regional association since they came from the sophisticated East Coast communities to the "vacant" west. Little attention was paid to the fact that the open spaces were, of course, once inhabited by others who were being dispossessed of land and rights as the white settlers moved forward.

Based on women's autobiographical journals and letters of that time, we get a vivid picture of their everyday experiences of setting up house sometimes over and over again as the men struggled to make a living. Rosemary Marangoly George, (1996) interprets the women's work as the practice of management. The writings reveal the successes and failures of the smooth running of the home. There were certainly opportunities for women as they ventured out of their traditional, East Coast cities and towns to engage in activities that brought them out of the house and into public arenas, but the work that demonstrates women's real leadership was conducted primarily in the domestic sphere. "'Going out' to work is not precluded, but pioneer women's work is most characteristically pictured as a gargantuan domestic effort" (Floyd, 2002, p. 26). Most of the women's writing lists the amazing scope and intensity of the activities necessary to maintain the household. But it was not a "healthy and useful" domesticity that is associated with keeping women in their places. With the changes in economic fortunes and absence of any real social or family network to rely upon in times of need, these women managed homes and created communities in the face of constant flux and the need for continual adaptation.

Stories of another group of women also in the mid-to-late nineteenth century reinforce this image. These are accounts of African-American women and women of mixed race who struggled to survive as freed women in the South. Historian Virginia Meacham Gould, (1998) describes the lives of two families in New Orleans and Natchez through the letters written by the women of the family.

Free women of colour usually combined family and household responsibility with the necessity of work. Not every woman could depend on the financial support of men, and even if they could, few did. Therefore the majority of free women of colour extended their domestic world into that of the public. [They] were recognized as highly skilled laundresses, seamstresses and

cooks. Many of them inhabited the petty marketing trade within their communities. (p. xxiii).

An example is Ann Battles Johnson who was born into slavery. After she and her mother were freed, she married a free man of colour and set up residence in Natchez. Though her husband William became quite prosperous with his barbershops, there was little legal protection for freed slaves and no social place for them in the strictly stratified Southern social system. Yet, while raising nine children, Ann became a manager of some note. By employing slaves, Ann engaged in marketing produce from her own garden and selling garments and accessories that she and her daughters sewed. After her husband was murdered, she found herself responsible for a large family and the family businesses. "[I]t appears that she managed the family's finances entirely on her own, even making decisions that William would have more than likely disapproved. … William might not have made much of a profit on the property, but Ann did" (Gould, 1998, p. xli).

Even more than other early U. S. women, free women of colour had few built-in networks of support and assistance. Their families were often scattered over distances that were not easy to traverse because of racism and prejudice. They survived largely by using their wits and their initiative. Some were lucky enough to be educated either at home or in the convents in the South. Gradually, after the Civil War, many free women of colour began to work as teachers offering others like them the opportunity to begin to participate in the wider world of emancipation.

The kinds of activities mentioned briefly here as characterizing many early U.S. women are not intended to be exhaustive. Many other accounts of similar feats are in the archives. The point of those referred to is that they are not described as leadership activities in any of the historical accounts. These and other narratives of courageous women, white, African American, Latina, Asian American and American Indian deserve a place in the annals of leadership. But the women mentioned here were not particularly known for any typical acts of leadership. The founding mothers lived very much in the midst of male leaders who were energetically engaged in crafting a new nation. The women's work, by contrast, was valued more for its supporting role – for shielding men from domestic strife, which might have prevented them from attending to their public duties.

Nevertheless, I believe all these women were leaders in their own settings. Like the educational leaders of today, early North American women managed human and material resources so that the family enterprise could be successful. This kind of leadership is not about the hero who risks all in the name of some ideal. It is a much more down-to-earth, messy business that involves navigating constantly changing circumstances and dealing with external forces over which individuals have little control. The brief glimpse of early North American women above demonstrates that U.S. women have long been capable of such endeavors – indeed, they have been *expected* to engage in them.

Why then, has school and district leadership been so little associated with women throughout U.S history? In her seminal work on women in the superintendency, Jackie Blount, 1998, explains how teaching became women's work and school administration men's. She shows that men took control of the more highly valued and highly paid work over time and that the social and political structures have combined to keep the gendered divisions ever since. As she points out, the superintendency is a key position to study because "[A]n important component of the effort to establish control of schools has occurred in contesting the definition of this position" (p. 2.) Blount writes of Ella Flagg Young, superintendent of Chicago's public schools in the early twentieth century who believed that women were destined to become superintendent in every district. Young thought that a gender shift would be possible if the relationships in schooling changed and if the purposes of schooling were re-evaluated. A re-configuration of power was necessary. Not only should administrators give up some of their power but teachers should have more to begin with.

This process was to be more than merely "giving input" or "having a voice," which are little more than symbolic gestures, but rather involved having real power. This was to be part of a holistic social system with students and other members of the school community also engaged in meaningful democratic process (Blount, 1998, p. 168).

How far have we come towards realizing Young's vision? The following section relates some of the current views of women in the superintendency and of women in the central office. There are

signs of progress, but when we juxtapose Grogan and Brunner's (2005, in press) findings against the stories of early U.S. women leading and managing as a matter of course, we realize that there are still powerful forces at work maintaining a gendered notion of leadership.

Leadership in the Superintendency

The superintendency is the name given to the executive level position at the top of the educational hierarchy in the United States. Public school superintendents are typically appointed by a school board of five or more lay individuals who are the elected[1] representatives of the school community known as a school district. As a research topic, women in the U.S. superintendency has only been investigated for the past 20 years or so. Several fairly recent studies make up the body of information that researchers commonly draw upon (see Beekley, 1996, 1999; Bell, 1995; Blount, 1998, 1999; Brunner, 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Chase, 1995; Chase & Bell, 1990; Grogan, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Grogan & Smith, 1998; Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Marietti & Stout, 1994; Mendez-Morse, 1999; Ortiz, 1999; Ortiz & Ortiz, 1995; Pavan, 1999; Scherr, 1995; Sherman & Repa, 1994; Skrla, Reyes, Scheurich, 2000; Tallerico, 2000; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996; Wesson & Grady, 1994; and others).

Until the AASA study (2003) conducted by Grogan and Brunner, there had been no comprehensive national studies of women in the superintendency. As for women central office administrators, much less is known—very few studies have been done of women in these positions. Further, little research has been conducted about women of color in both positions, and even when studies are done, because women of colour in leadership positions are rare, very few voices are heard (see Alston, 1999, 2000; Brunner & Peyton-Claire, 2000; Enomoto, Gardiner, & Grogan, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000; Jackson 1999; Kalbus, 2000; Mendez-Morse, 2000, 2004; Nozaki, 2000; Ortiz, 1982, 2000; Ortiz & Ortiz, 1995; Simms, 2000).

To get a current glimpse of women in the superintendency, this article will discuss selected findings from reports of the AASA survey (Brunner, Grogan, & Prince 2003, Grogan & Brunner, 2005; in press) including comparisons between the 2003 survey and the 2000 survey of the general population of superintendents (Glass, Brunner & Björk, 2000). Gradually, research is building a comprehensive portrait of a group of modern women who are educational leaders in very public, risky settings. Although their forebears were not often (if ever) described as leaders, these superintendents are recognized as such. Are their activities and skills today very different from those of remarkable women in the past?

One important statistic to emerge from this survey is that women now lead 18 percent of all public school districts in the United States (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Ten years ago a mere 7 percent of districts nationwide were headed by women superintendents (Montenegro, 1993). But it is important to consider that although the numbers of women in the superintendency have more than doubled over the past ten years, they are still woefully small in light of the facts that women comprise 51 percent of the general population, 52 percent of elementary principals, 83 percent of teachers in elementary settings (Shakeshaft, 1999), 57 percent of central office administrators and 33 percent of assistant/associate/deputy/area /superintendencies (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999). So, relatively few women are, in a sense, like the early pioneer women. They are finding their own ways to lead educational systems, and to manage all the unpredictable circumstances they are faced with in these turbulent times – even in large districts.

The survey revealed that the proportion of women serving in large, medium and small districts across the United States is very similar to the proportion of men serving in the same size districts (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Of course, since 82 percent of districts are still headed by men, more men than women head up the largest districts, but women are there too. Women are in large districts, urban districts, suburban districts and rural districts. They are demonstrating that they can manage operations that are staffed by many as well as by few. They serve highly diverse communities and homogeneous ones dotted throughout the United States in every state and region. But women superintendents are not necessarily doing everything the same way as their male counterparts.

Women Leaders Shaping the Role

One common thread between early North American women's activities and those of womensuper-intendents today is their focus on the well-being of children and families. Most women superintendents have been elementary principals (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). They bring a strong interest in educating the whole child and in looking out for those most at-risk. Women ranked programmes for children-at-risk as significantly more important than men did (Grogan & Brunner, in press).

Tapping into the community is seen as important to women superintendents. Grogan and Brunner (in press) found that more women than men sought citizen participation very frequently. It was clear that all superintendents valued participation in decision-making, but women regularly invited it. For example, information from district administrators, school board members, fellow superintendents and teachers was important to all superintendents. However, women valued it more highly than men, and women were much more likely to include teachers in the groups giving input. Women appear to be situating their leadership efforts within the larger community.

Women view the importance of building learning communities through the instructional expertise they bring to the position. When comparing the results of the two most recent surveys of superintendents, both men and women believed that improving curriculum and instruction, knowledge of teaching and learning, and knowledge of curriculum are considered to be strengths for women (Grogan & Brunner, in press). More women than men also labeled the changing curriculum as high priorities for the pre-service and in-service of superintendents (Grogan & Brunner, in press).

Given the recent reform movement in the United States prompted largely by the *No Child Left Behind* Act (2001), there is a much greater emphasis on curriculum and testing issues, even at the level of superintendent of schools, than there has been in the past. The superintendent's role has not always been thought of as being directly involved in instruction. (See Brunner, Grogan & Björk, 2002, for a fuller discussion of the evolution of the role of the superintendent.) Grogan and Brunner's findings (in press) show that women are bringing to the superintendency a strong emphasis on learning and creating communities of learners.

When the 2003 study of women superintendents' perception of their board's primary expectations is compared with the perceptions of male and female superintendents reported in the 2000 study, some revealing differences are found. Both groups chose educational leader as their top choice, but significantly more women in both studies felt it to be the primary expectation. The facts are that a significant number of women superintendents have backgrounds in curriculum and instruction, most women have spent more years in the classroom before entering administration, and most place a high premium on continuing education for themselves (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Women see themselves as educational leaders perhaps because they enjoy teaching, and administration gives them an opportunity to foster learning on a greater scale.

A small but growing number of women superintendents are associated with reform initiatives – particularly women of colour (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). They are seeing themselves as change agents who have the capacity to turn around districts where students are struggling. All superintendents must focus today on the achievement gap and find ways to keep students in schools, but it is notable that women do not shy away from entering the political fray to transform their districts.

It is too early to tell whether or not the current context of heightened attention to student academic achievement is responsible for the surge in the numbers of women in the superintendency. To be sure, women have been socialized into administrative positions associated with curriculum and instruction, and women have been encouraged to build communities of support for themselves from earlier times of being isolated and on the margins of leadership. In teaching longer and remaining in the arena of children and families, women view educational leadership as an extension of classroom work. Thus, at the risk of essentializing women, these may be some explanations for why more women are obtaining superintendencies now than in the past, and for why many women currently express interest in serving in the role.

Not only do women appear to be gaining a stronger grasp on the highest educational position

in the United States, but they also appear to be finding ways to bring to the position skills and expertise more typically associated with women – keeping instruction at the forefront and developing relationships with school and wider community members that can help foster the academic and social growth of the student. It is evident from the results of the surveys, that women and men superintendents are different enough in their responses to questions surrounding the role that we might expect women educational leaders to evolve further in the future. And we might expect that women educators will view the position as an attractive opportunity to make a difference for children and their families.

As mentioned earlier, 40 percent of the central office participants in the 2003 study, expressed interest in pursuing the position (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). This means that 60 percent did not. It is not known how many central office men aspire to the superintendency. Since it is a highly stressful position associated with exaggeratedly long hours and relatively low compensation, (Grogan & Brunner, 2005), it is possible that the numbers of men aspiring to the superintendency are similar to the numbers of women. More important, the recent survey dispels the myth that women do not want the position.

But for women, there are detractors. Few receive the necessary mentoring, even fewer women of colour are encouraged to pursue the job, and the pressures of combining family responsibilities with administrative ones take their toll on marriages and career opportunities (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Very few women educators serve yet in districts headed by women (Brunner, Grogan & Prince, 2003). This means that for women considering the position, there are few role models and few opportunities to even discuss the possibility.

Conclusion

It would be premature to predict the kind of impact on the superintendency that will be made by the growing presence of women in the position. Currently, the weight of the discourse of educational leadership is much stronger than the influence of the relatively few women shaping the role in ways indicated by the survey. What is important though, is the value of the presence of women in and of itself. Even if women cannot immediately change the way superintending has been done in the past, their public declaration of interest in the position, and their increasing success in gaining the position will have a powerful effect on the next generation of women educators. Once it becomes commonplace to see women as executive leaders in education, they can settle into the job and determine priorities for themselves.

There are indications that Ella Flagg Young's vision resonates with contemporary U.S. women educators. The results of the 2003 study certainly suggest that the superintendency is more closely associated with learning and teaching than it has been since the very early conception of the position as teacher-scholar (Callahan, 1966). Increasingly, superintendents are being described as instructional leaders (Petersen & Barnett, 2003). In addition, there is an emphasis on the need for more democratic processes (Kowalski, 2003) allowing superintendents to manage the politics of serving diverse communities. These trends echo Young's hope for more integration of administration with the business of the classroom.

However, until there is a more equitable distribution of women in the highest levels of educational leadership, we are sending a message that says women's leadership is still not much valued. Power resides in the system structures and practices that have gone unquestioned for too long. Researching and writing about women in leadership helps to draw attention to the power imbalance, but it is doubtful that research alone has much impact on the discourse of educational leadership. Change will only come about if the battle is fought on many fronts.

First we need to think of women as having always demonstrated the skills that are associated with leadership of school systems – like managing human and material resources to achieve collective goals, taking initiative, fighting contentious battles in public as well as in private, taking risks for the welfare of children and families, and dealing with uncertainty on a daily basis. Having done the reading that formed the basis of the beginning of this article, I am more convinced than ever that there is a false sense of women's and men's activities as somehow socializing them differently to notions of leadership. While it might have been true, until recently, that women were not military generals, business magnates or politicians, the kind of leadership that educational

systems need is not learned in those settings. It is learned in studying the business of education and in honing the skills described above – skills as much associated with women's activities as with men's.

Some hold that U.S. women are already seen as leaders, but the dearth of women not only in the superintendency but also in all politically charged, public positions belies the fact. Thus all educators, researchers and practitioners alike must take the situation to heart. The following eight recommendations grow out of a firm belief that it will take a collaborative effort to bring about real change – researchers working with practitioners, women working with men, white educators working with educators of color.

Some of these recommendations emerge from the results of the recent surveys that are echoes of past research. Some of the recommendations have formed as a consequence of addressing many groups of women superintendents and other aspiring women leaders across the country. They are not the only ideas, but they would serve as a good start.

To address the striking imbalance in the numbers of women and men in the highest position of educational leadership: (1) state and federal agencies and foundations must fund more research on the topic; (2) women and men researchers need to take the topic more seriously and bring renewed critical perspectives and energy to it; (3) women in positions of leadership must talk about the joy they derive from their work; (4) women and men in positions of power in educational systems must deliberately mentor more women and especially more women of color; (5) pre-service women teachers must be directed towards leadership as a way to remain close to teaching and learning; (6) women leaders must talk about and think creatively with other women of ways to couple family responsibilities with administration; (7) compensation for superintendents must increase to attract the highly qualified women central office administrators who are already relatively well paid; and (8) gender power differentials in educational administration must be acknowledged.

In the interests of the next generation of young women not only in the United States but in many other countries, the daughters, nieces and cousins of the men who remain in control of educational leadership we must make this concerted effort, men and women together, white and of color around the globe.

Notes

[1] There are some instances where the school board is appointed by the mayor or the county councillor and others in which the superintendent is elected.

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