Women in the Superintendency: Review of the Recent Literature

The past five years of research on women superintendents have explored the demographics, personal characteristics and motivations, leadership styles, lifestyle issues, gender-related barriers, and successful strategies of these leaders.

Twenty-seven percent, or about 1 in 4 women are superintendents, and this number has increased by only 2% since 2010 (American Association of School Superintendents, 2015). A variety of data sources report a similar percentage and wide disparity between the overrepresentation of women as classroom teachers and gross underrepresentation as superintendents (Finnan & McCord, 2016; Finnan, McCord, Stream, Petersen, & Ellerson, 2015; Kerr, Kerr, & Miller, 2014; McCord, Stream, Ellerson, & Finnan, 2013). The 27-percent figure reveals the inverted representation of women leaders in a workforce in which women are 76 percent of teachers, 52 percent of principals, and 78 percent of central-office administrators (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; Superville, 2016). As such, the U.S. Census Bureau identified the superintendency as “the most male dominated executive position of any profession in the United States” (Isernhagen, 2013, p. 117).

The widely cited 2010 AASA decennial study (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011) provided several insights about gender-specific elements of the superintendency, including: a) women become superintendents at an older age than men and make up a more diverse group, with 11 percent reporting as non-Caucasian, compared to 5 percent of male superintendents; b) significantly fewer women superintendents are married or in a partner relationship. This data, aligned with the significantly higher rate of divorce among women superintendents, “suggests the price that might be paid by the career choice for women” (p. 2); c) more women lead the nation’s urban and suburban districts than men; d) Women superintendents
have more years of classroom-teaching experience; e) women are hired from within their present
district less frequently than men; and f) women are hired for the superintendency for their
expertise in curriculum and instructional leadership, while men are hired for their “personal
characteristics” such as honesty and tact (p. 2).

A hiring study by Isernhagen (2013) revealed that the least progress made in hiring
women leaders occurred among the most male-dominated districts, those that consisted of less
than 40% women leaders. During 2002-2008, that group of districts’ new administrative hires
were 29% women, but at least half of the districts hired no women administrators at all.
Similarly, 27 percent of their assistant principal and principal hires were women, but again, half
of those districted hires no women for those positions. In the same period, districts composed of
60% women leaders hired 59% women administrators and 57% women assistant principals and
principals.

Women superintendents suggest that increasing their numbers can be achieved by
funding more central office positions, shifting some duties to other staff to allow the woman
superintendent to excel in what she likes to do, providing women with incentives for gaining
superintendent certification, and rewarding states for hiring women superintendents (Wallace,
2015).

Women aspire to the superintendency to make a difference, lead learning, engage in team
building, and address challenges, and are largely influenced by their commitment to education
and desire to have an impact on student achievement (Wallace, 2015). In a study of black female
superintendents, Angel, Killacky, and Johnson (2013) identified four personal themes that
influenced their paths to becoming educational leaders: a) an internalized ethical system of
values that promoted integrity, respect, care, honesty, equity and justice; b) support influence,
from, in most cases, female supporters such as mothers, aunts, and women teachers and community leaders who instilled a belief that they could do anything they wanted to do; c) high expectations from growing up in a culture that set high standards of achievement; and d) the recognition that a high level of preparedness, including a doctorate, was necessary to be considered for a superintendency. Beard’s (2012) study highlighted four lived experiences of a successful black woman deputy superintendent that impacted her path to leadership: A strong sense of right and wrong instilled by her father, belief in education as the ticket out of poverty, early leadership experiences in school, and a strong sense of justice growing up during the civil rights era.

Based on an analysis of previous studies and their own research, Grogan and Shakeshift (2011) identified five types of female superintendent leadership styles. Relational leaders utilize a horizontal vs. hierarchical approach in which “power with” is developed rather than “power over” (p. 20). Superintendents who build coalitions within the district, ask for input from others in decision making, and consider doing the job well more important than who gets credit for it are examples of relational leaders. Balanced leadership refers to women’s efforts to create a work-life balance in a career that demands long hours and stress. One of the positive aspects of leading a dual life of managing a district and managing a household is the woman leader’s ability to understand and empathize with parents in the district. Spiritual leadership involves connectedness, consciousness raising, self-understanding, hope, and resilience, particularly among women leaders of color. Women with a social justice leadership style are motivated to change the status quo and make a difference in the lives of students who have not been adequately served by the system. The theme of leadership for learning acknowledges that women superintendents have stronger instructional skills, drawn from more years spent teaching
than men, which gives them an advantage as district leaders. As leaders for learning, women superintendents most often focus on creating change through improvements in learning.

Garrett-Staib (2015) found no statistically significant differences between the practices and behaviors of male and female superintendents as assessed through the Learning Practice Inventory, which measures five practices of exemplary leaders. The greatest gender difference was found in the “encourage the heart” construct, and the least difference expressed in the “challenge the process” tenet. The authors suggest that the lack of significant difference found in men and women’s leadership practices could lessen discriminatory practices in hiring.

Women aspiring to the superintendency and current superintendents expressed varied degrees of concern with lifestyle issues such as family responsibilities, privacy, stress factors, and characteristics of the district that impacted work-life balance. Among these issues, Sperandio and Devdas (2015) found that two-thirds of women respondents considered their spouse or partner’s involvement in making the decision to apply for a superintendency as important or very important and expressed a low concern about finding childcare and domestic help due to, apparently, their “considerable self-reliance” (p. 344). The majority also stated that they would not be willing to commute for longer than an hour to the district office, due to the substantial time already invested in the job, the need to keep a balance between work and home life, and the importance of living within the school district community. Working in the spotlight, particularly in rural areas, reduced personal privacy, required vigilance in conversations, and hindered the social life of women superintendents (Isernhagen, 2013; Klatt, 2014; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Proximity to the district office also factored in to women’s quality of life since a longer commute gave them time to de-stress before returning home, while superintendents who lived close to the district office experienced spill over that impacted their family lives (Klatt, 2014).
Kowalski, Young, and Petersen (2013) included gender in their study of a related issue, community involvement, and found that gender did not account for the variance in superintendents’ degrees of involvement.

In the 2010 decennial study (Kowalski et al., 2011), women rated gender discrimination, family obligations and concerns, and few women superintendents as role models as the greatest barriers to becoming superintendents. Forty-five percent reported that they encountered discrimination during their career path to the superintendency. Older women superintendents who did not consider the superintendency a possibility in their generation came to the job through mentors who identified them as leaders (Muñoz, Pankake, Ramalho, Mills, & Simonsson, 2014). They did not aspire to the position because they just did not want to fight to get to the top” (Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 779). The same study found that younger, aspiring superintendents, conversely, prepared for certification but displayed a lack of assertiveness about creating a plan and strategy for gaining a position, seemingly waiting for the right opportunity or a personal invitation, “the coveted tap on the shoulder” (Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 781).

The lack of women superintendents severely limits access to women mentors (Angel et al., 2013; Boyland, 2013; Brown, 2014; Garrett-Staib & Burkman, 2015; Kowalski et al., 2011; Muñoz et al., 2014). A Texas study about the average number of women central office administrators found that gender had a very small impact on these hiring practices; the data reflected that women superintendents are not supporting other women more than male superintendents (Sampson, 2015).

Discriminatory experiences women faced included job interview questions about a woman’s ability to travel (Muñoz et al., 2014) and school board attitudes about gender and
ability (Beard, 2012; Brown, 2014). Phenomenological research about black women superintendents provided detailed accounts of the intersectional discrimination these leaders encounter, such as being advised to change their appearance and behavior if they wanted to rise to the superintendency (Muñoz et al., 2014) and enduring stereotypical bias, as one woman described: “Too often the tape that goes off when I walk in the door . . . is that you have an inherent inability to succeed” (Brown, 2014, p. 580). Black women leaders had to display higher standards of excellence and work harder than their peers to prove themselves; their credentials benefited them less than having a strong white male mentor; self-recruitment to the superintendency was perceived as crucial to future black female recruitment and retention; and race was always a factor in the politics of education (Brown, 2014). Black women aspirants recognized that power systems oppressed their voices and functioned with hidden agendas, unwritten rules, and personal vendettas that hindered their path to the superintendency (Angel et al., 2013).

In addition to discriminatory attitudes and behavior, school boards presented barriers to superintendents’ success by not being clear about expectations and resisting change (Isernhagen, 2013).

Women can create their own barriers by accepting societal expectations that women are caretakers first. Muñoz et al. (2014) interviewed an aspiring woman superintendent who turned down a position because her husband was ill and she had three children, stating, “my philosophy always has been that nothing compensates for failure in the home” (p. 772). In contrast, Klatt (2014) used an archetypal model to describe the impact of school board members’ gendered expectations of a female superintendent with school-age children in a close-knit rural district. As an expression of the Mother archetype, the superintendent was perceived as a mother to both the
district and her daughters who could multitask various aspects of her life, and her actions related to her home life were respected.

Successful strategies reported by women superintendents included positive and trusting relationships with the school board; conscientious attention to staff through retreats, motivational seminars, and small celebrations; inclusion of teachers in decision making; and meeting with former superintendents, community groups, parents and students at school events (Isernhagen, 2013). Strategies leading to successful experiences for black women superintendents included knowledge of curriculum and teacher quality (Beard, 2012), developing resilience by never allowing someone else’s problems of race, gender, and the playing of negative social politics to determine their self-worth as African American women” (Brown, 2014, p. 592), and focusing on social justice and community building (Katz, 2012).
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