Just Do It: Women Superintendents Speak to Aspiring Women
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American Educational Research Association
Annual Meeting 2006
San Francisco, CA

Abstract

A mixed method study using surveys and in-depth interviews was conducted with women school superintendents in four Midwestern states during the 1999-2000 school year to understand how they perceive their leadership skills, their uses of power in their positions, and how they generally talk about the job. Results of how the women perceived their leadership practices (Katz, 2004) and uses of power (Katz, in press) have been reported elsewhere. The purpose of this paper is to reveal analysis of unexplored data from the interviews of nine women superintendents who gave rich descriptions of the various aspects of their work lives particularly in the context of offering up advice to those women aspiring to the superintendency.

Background

At the 1999 Annual Meeting of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) in San Francisco, I walked into a session not knowing much about the topic: women school superintendents. The room was packed; mostly women and a few men were listening to two women school superintendents focusing their presentation on a telling of their work lives. What I remember most about their talk was that they seemed to truly enjoy their work, their enthusiasm was evident. Their purpose in providing a seminar for those who were intrigued enough to come to the session from a listing in the program agenda was to "convince" those women in attendance that this top job in education was truly "women's work," that more women should take a risk and apply for the position as superintendent, that women are natural managers, instructional leaders, and nurturers – all qualities needed in leading 21st century schools (the millennium was upon us). As I talked to people around me, I realized those attending the

session were those in the pipeline for the position of superintendent. Those women had positions as school principals, others had central office positions, and many were in graduate educational leadership programs, as I was at the time. At my table were a couple of women doctoral students who talked about their current research projects with women school superintendents. I had just finished doctoral coursework and was searching for a research topic. My background in schools began first as a speech and language clinician and then as a special education administrator. I had encountered gender discrimination when applying for administrative positions and felt I was situated in practice on gender issues in school administration. Beginning a study with women school superintendents could bring my experiences from practice into research. My attendance at this particular ASCD session was my research beginning. Here is where I began my continuing quest to delve into the work lives of women school superintendents. Besides fulfilling my own needs, hopefully through my work, I have been able to give voice to those women who exist as an underrepresented group in the superintendency. A greater body of research needs to be conducted with women to learn how they access, maintain, and thrive in their positions. Skrla and colleagues (2000) emphasize this when they call for the ". . . conversation among and about women superintendents to increase in numbers, to widen in scope, and to escalate in volume so that neither the women themselves nor the education profession in general continue to remain silent" (p. 71). Through my research and writing, I hope that women currently in the pipeline for the position will "hear" how women are truly enjoying their roles as superintendents and those aspiring women will be prompted to pursue the position even more seriously.

In 1999-2000, I conducted mixed method research with women who were practicing school superintendents in four Midwestern states, n = 210. The purpose of my

research was to generally add to the existing body of literature particularly looking at women's work lives as superintendents through an investigation of their leadership practices and uses of power. Surveys sent to all 210 women consisted of demographic questions and two published inventories: the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (Kouzes and Posner, 1995) and Your Sources of Influence (Rosner, 1990) which asked questions regarding how those in powerful roles perceived their of uses of power. Quantitative research questions asked whether or not there were differences in how women perceived their leadership practices and uses of power based on age, years of experience, and the size and structure of their school districts. In-depth interviews were conducted with nine women who were practicing in the four states. The results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses found there were significant differences in how women perceived their leadership practices (Katz, 2004) and how they perceived their uses of power (Katz, 2006).

<div align="center">Methods and Data Sources</div>

All 210 women who were practicing superintendents in four Midwestern states (as listed on state lists) were invited to participate in a study. Of the 210 surveys that were mailed, 14 women superintendents had left their positions, which reduced the population for the study to 196 women superintendents among the four states. From that population, 76 percent (n = 148) returned usable surveys. Of the 148 surveys used in the data analysis, 65 percent of the participants were between the ages of 50 and 56. The mean age of the participants was 52 years with a range in age of 38 to 65 years. Sixty-six percent of the participants held earned doctorates. In response to a question regarding length of time taken to achieve the first superintendency, almost 50% of the participants indicated that it took less than one year after gaining certification. Almost 95% of the

participants indicated that they were European-American. Regarding marital status, 85.1 percent reported they were married. Further analysis of the demographic data enabled the creation of a profile of a woman superintendent practicing in the Midwest during the school year of 1999-2000. Table 1 displays the data concerning this profile (Katz, 2004).

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Variables	$\underline{N}$	$\underline{M}$	$\underline{SD}$	Minimum	Maximum
Age	148	51.99	4.62	38	65
Age at first superintendency	148	45.70	5.67	30	59
# years in present position	148	5.40	3.76	1	20
# years teaching prior to administration	147	10.58	4.97	0	29
# administrative positions before superintendency	148	2.90	2.43	0	8
# superintendent jobs applied for before 1st job	148	1.47	2.48	0	15
# school buildings	148	6.26	8.71	1	78
# building administrators	148	9.65	12.11	1	78
# central office staff	148	5.23	5.68	1	50
structure of district – ratio of # central office staff / # buildings	148	1.17	.75	.22	4.00

The nine interview participants varied in age, years of experience and worked in different size districts from a district enrolling 100 students to a district with an enrollment of 23,000 students. Eight women were European American and one woman was African American. I conducted interviews with women in their offices or at another location of their choice. The participants represented a wide range of both demographic

and geographic locations among the four Midwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The data were collected through the use of an interview guide containing structured questions and other questions that might arise out of the course of the interview. Opportunities for clarification were presented during the interviews. For example, at the conclusion of the interviews, women were asked if there were any other questions they would ask if conducting the interview and if they had anything to add. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed fully to facilitate the use of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify common themes and concepts (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). I used a conceptual matrix from Miles and Huberman (1994) to help visualize and code the data. The matrix allowed me to look at specific chunks or phrases from the interview data specific to each participant and then by using the constant comparative method the themes became evident.

An interview protocol was followed using questions asking about leadership and issues of power. Additional questions asked about types of barriers that might have been factors in deciding to apply for the position and what barriers created problems for them in their roles as superintendents. Other interview questions asked if they believed whether or not men and women lead differently, would they pursue this same career path again, and asked them what advice they would give to women aspiring to the position. Answers to those "additional" and "other" questions gave way to interesting concepts and themes and it is those concepts and themes that will be discussed in this paper.

Reports of data analysis from a national study of women in the superintendency and in central office positions commissioned by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) revealed that 37.7% of women in central office positions

answered "yes" to the question, "Do you aspire to the superintendency?" (Brunner,

Ottino, & Grogan, 2005). This statistic disappointed me as I hoped for a larger percentage

of women wanting to achieve the superintendency. Remembering that the women

superintendents in my study seemed to overwhelmingly like their positions, I was

prompted to take another look at data from my study that particularly addressed the type

of advice women in my study gave to aspiring women. This paper presents data from the

interviews as the women were responding to questions about their work lives and

offering up advice to aspiring women. As I remembered the enthusiasm and energy in the

conference session in 1999 generated by two women school superintendents who were

excited enough about their roles to present at a national conference, I found the same

sense of enthusiasm and energy as women I interviewed talked about their work lives. In

analyzing the data, I realized that women superintendents in my study were encouraging

those aspiring women to take the risk and apply for the position, in essence by saying,

"Just do it."

<div align="center">Conceptual Framework: Challenging the Process</div>

> "Living at risk is jumping off the cliff and building your wings on the way down." Ray Bradbury

> "Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing." Helen Keller

> "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I . . . I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." Robert Frost

Reading and re-reading over the pages of transcribed interviews to "dig deeper"

into previously unexplored data, I came to the realization that the interview participants

were *challenging the process*. This leadership practice defined by Kouzes and Posner

(1995) as involving big challenge, change, and risk was exactly what these women had done in applying for and in achieving their positions. It is also what they do to maintain and thrive in their positions. Kouzes and Posner (1995) define leadership as "the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations" (p. 30). They conducted extensive research on effective and "personal best" practices of leaders and developed a list of five exemplary leadership practices. It is these five practices, *challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart* that are incorporated and assessed in their Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI-Self). Kouzes and Posner argue that leaders who use *challenging the process* are searching for opportunities and experimenting and taking risks. Also when leaders *challenge the process*, they search for opportunities by seeking innovative ways to change, grow and improve. One participant said that her learning and growth process during her superintendency has "made me better." Those who *challenge the process* are restless for improvement, looking outside and inside, always for a better way. Given the barriers that women face when applying for, accessing and maintaining their positions, women in this study *challenged the process*. Documented through research, barriers for women include the lack of role models, fewer opportunities to find mentors, difficulties in networking with peers, and the difficulties inherent for women due to male domination in the role. One of this study's participants who was the superintendent of a large district with an enrollment of 23,000 students talked about her experience in her first superintendency in a suburban district of a large metropolitan area. She said she was "shocked that there were twelve suburban school districts" and not one had a female superintendent. "And the news media was all over me and I couldn't figure out why.

When I became superintendent the local school newspaper came out against hiring me.

Well, could they ever picture a woman making tough financial decisions?"

<div style="text-align: center;">Challenging the Process: Taking Risks</div>

> Those of you, most of you, who have been up from the teaching
> ranks, know little girls are told to be careful and little boys are told,
> 'It's great, Johnny, that you jumped.' So take the risk, be the little
> girl who actually jumped off the side of the wall and did not listen
> when her mother said you might get hurt (Evans, 2002).

This quote by Linda Evans at the 2002 American Association for School

Administrators (AASA) Women Administrator's Conference captures the type of risk

taking women in my study urged aspiring women to take. Many women in this study felt

that the biggest risks came from their efforts to reorganize or make major changes in their

districts. One woman reshaped her system in a month by removing an assistant

superintendent of personnel and hiring a facilitator for multicultural education "in a

community that didn't want to even deal with the term multicultural." Several women

said they were the first woman superintendent hired by the district and felt gender

discrimination played a role in some initial problems: problems with a union president,

problems being the only woman at a county meeting, problems with the "old boys

network. "I think primarily because there was an old boys' network here, there was a lot

of posturing with me. It would have been the safe thing to do to let things just ride and

not try to make changes in the district." This woman had to reassure her administrative

team that what she needed was "time to connect with people out in the trenches and that

it was going to be just fine."

Risk-taking for some meant being sensitive to what the risks were and preventing

any fallout that might occur. One woman's advice came in the form of finding out first

about strongly held beliefs and practice, "especially when you are in a new situation"

before taking on what might be a big risk. Women talked about strategies they used to

challenge the system, moving people out of their comfort level to learn about and

implement new programs that have appeal and efficacy for all students. These women

talked about taking risks such as reorganizing the school district in the first year of

employment, re-applying for a superintendency in one of the two poorest districts in the

state to make a difference, and hiring a multicultural facilitator in a district that didn't

want to own their diversity. Several women were hired to specifically reorganize their

districts. It is interesting to note that the women were cautious in their efforts to initiate

and effect change, preferring to build relationships first, helping the school community

get to know them and what they were about, and assuring staff that they were in a safe,

protective environment so they would be willing to take the risks needed to change

educational practices and programs.

When giving direct advice to aspiring women, participants in my study were very

intent on encouraging women to go after the position. Encouragement came in very direct

forms, such as: just do it, apply for the job and don't be afraid because it's not that hard.

This quote illustrates how one woman encouraged aspiring women to take the risk

believing strongly that the job itself could be managed.

> Don't be afraid because it's not that hard, the day to day operations of it. It's not
> some secret club. It's hard work but it's not like a big puzzle that you have to
> figure out. It's logical thinking and accountability and being responsible and
> digging out the answers and helping each other. I would encourage them to go for
> it. I think we have a lot to offer.

One woman who is African American gave advice from her standpoint that

women are naturally situated to manage due to family responsibilities, women's teaching

experience and roles in curriculum and instruction, and women's leadership styles. She elaborated these points by saying:

> I would tell women to do it. It's not that difficult a job as it is perceived to be and that women are extremely capable managing and leading a school district. For two reasons: most women or all the women in my family and I can only speak to my experiences, generally lead and manage their households and their families and do a very good job with it and it's not that different when you are leading a school district. Women tend to have more direct knowledge about curriculum and instruction and understand leadership, collaboration, understand how to work with teams and they tend not to have an authoritarian approach to leadership. They don't feel they have to have their leadership or position validated by some act or the other. So they don't need people to reinforce where they are because generally women who find themselves in the superintendent's position have a pretty good idea about who they are.

Encouragement also came in the form of discussions related to what these women do in their roles and in answers to questions such as: What has been your most significant contribution as superintendent? All nine women talked about how they could effect change in a much more global nature in the superintendency then when they were teachers, assistant principals, principals, and even in central office positions. They traced their influence (effecting change) from teaching a class of students to leading a district and influencing hundreds of students (varying by size of the district) but also having the opportunity to influence both internal and external stakeholders of their school communities. One woman pointed out that she increased collaboration among her staff as they told her before she became the superintendent, they "never really sat down and talked to each other about this kind of stuff before and its fun and it feels good . . ." and due to that ". . . the conversation between the staff has increased, has grown, has developed, has emerged."

Among the ideas to encourage aspiring women was talk about what was needed to do to be successful in the role. Dedication was a theme as women discussed

establishing credibility as a leader with advice such as, "coming up through the ranks

helps," and also, "remain centered and focused in your work." One woman talked about

being the only woman superintendent among 12 men when the regional group met. She

had to establish credibility "among the men."

> When I entered [name change] county I was the only woman at the table of
> twelve for two years and it was a little unnerving the first few times because
> everything was 'you guys' and 'gentlemen' and they would look at me and
> say, 'oh, [name change] and I was like, whatever, you'll get used to me, I'm
> here to stay,' and you build your own credibility with them.

Several women gave advice and encouragement through their talk about knowing

yourself, knowing what centers you, and knowing why you want the job. Wesson (1998)

when giving women tips in seeking equal access and treatment in educational

administration believed that continual self-assessment must be the process to understand

one's strengths and abilities, interests and talents.

Women had differing views about men and women leading differently,

responding to a direct question about this issue. Some women talked about "soft-touch

leadership," women establishing relationships, doing things "together," not being "into

power as men are . . . there is a lot we [as women] don't control." Aside from the direct

question about differences in leading, women talked about other issues that had a

gendered tone such as *networking*: "We are not as good as men are at the networking

concept;" also *work ethic*: We are overburdened by our motivation to be "really, really

perfect . . ." In her research, Blackmore (1999) found that to counter feelings of

increasing anger, frustration and isolation, women principals worked even harder and

longer. One of the women in my study who led a large school district would have to tell

her women central office people to leave and go home when as she put it, "The men had

left at a reasonable hour." This same person believed that women in educational

leadership positions were quite concerned about having mentors or trusted friends who

could be called upon for advice. She mentioned that as a woman, sometimes you don't

want the question(s) you ask, or your comments ". . . out on the superintendent

grapevine." Another gendered issue mentioned was that of *confidence level* – different

for women than for men. Women were thought to gain confidence (that men seemed to

have initially) with years of experience in the superintendency, "I think the second

superintendency is easier than the first, or the third year is better than the first year."

<p style="text-align:center">Significance</p>

My research shows women superintendents feeling comfortable and really

enjoying themselves in their leadership roles, comfortable enough to give honest and

straightforward advice to those aspiring women. It also shows them enjoying their

positions so much that they wished they had pursued the superintendency earlier in their

career path and that they "absolutely" would pursue the same path if they had it to do all

over again. One of the women in my study was fifty-six years old and in her first year as

a superintendent. When she was asked the question about what advice she would give to

aspiring women, she had lots to say:

> I would encourage them to do so. I really enjoy it and wish I had done it sooner. I
> really do. It's just really fun and I can effect more change at this level. The places
> that I can effect change are the places that I enjoy. Working with the community
> and working with the board [are parts of the job] I've really enjoyed and so I most
> definitely would do it again.

Several researchers (Bjork and Adams-Rogers, 1999, Grogan, 1996) have

concluded that women in the superintendency provide irrefutable evidence that they are

able to perform tasks required of anyone in the role and furnish important role models

that are so necessary for those aspiring to the position. Brunner (1998) believed one benefit of research about women superintendents is to dispel a myth that since many women weren't in the position, they weren't able to fulfill the responsibilities required of the position. Shakeshaft (1989) advocates for research which includes the female perspective, she also stresses the need for studying gender and organizations. If men and women are to learn and work as equals in schools, gender differences must be considered. Adult educators, from potential mentors to superintendents to professors in educational leadership preparation programs, must be aware of gender differences in order to appreciate and to provide appropriately for the learning and leadership styles of both men and women.

This year's AERA annual meeting theme calls for education researchers to meet the standard of producing research in the public interest. When I ask whether this kind of research can serve the public interest, my answer has to do with how I would define "the public." In this instance, the public and primary audience reading my paper and the audience I am writing for possibly consists of pre K-12 educational leaders and students in graduate-level educational leadership preparation programs – those women in the pipeline for superintendency positions. As I stated earlier, I am hoping that those aspiring women will heed the advice women in my study offer and take the risk to apply and move into superintendency positions. Additionally, reports of this type of research can be used by professors of educational leadership programs to acquaint their students with first hand accounts of how women describe their work lives in the top job in education. Other readers (other members of the public) could be school board members and search consultants who might find women's ways of leading fitting for the kind of leadership

they are interested in for their communities – "soft touch leadership" as one woman put

it.

In her article describing her path to the superintendency, Kalbus (2000) detailed

her experiences as a woman of color, an Asian American who experienced discrimination

when applying for positions as superintendent. Here she writes about another woman of

color who reflects on her feelings about not getting the position.

> As a postscript to my experience in 1992, at the 1998 election in this same county, an African American woman ran against a White man endorsed by the incumbent to succeed him as the county superintendent. The African American woman lost the race by less than 0.5%. When she was considering putting her name in for the county superintendent position, she sought me out to say that she clearly remembered what I had said after my interview in 1992. She recalled my statement, "When the opportunity knocks, you have to open the door." She shared with me that she was inspired by that remark. Now she, similar to me before her, appeared to have failed in her path to the superintendency. Yet I believe that although I did not get the position, I did open the door and leave it ajar for others to follow. . . If we truly believe in equity and equality when dealing with the education of all children, then women—and especially women of color—need to believe in themselves, invest in themselves, and attain to make it to the top. To serve our diverse students, we need to continue on the path to the superintendency until we arrive (p. 555-556).

This quote sums up my feelings surrounding my hope that more women apply for

the position of superintendent and continue to do so "until they arrive." Recently, a

woman superintendent told me that she was part of a search team to find a superintendent

for a suburban district in a large metropolitan area. The team recommended five

candidates. These five people had all the qualities and experience that the community

sought and even though the team wanted to have diverse candidates, they were all

women. The woman who told me this story believes that more women will be filling

vacant superintendency positions in the near future. Comparing statistics I found in

Illinois, in 2000, 10% of the superintendents were women; in 2005, 20% were women.

We are making some progress but not enough. We haven't "arrived" until we no longer can say that what we have in this country is women teaching and men leading. If 75% of teachers in the U.S. are women and teaching is the first position on the pathway leading to the superintendency, we would expect to see many more women in the role. As a professor in an educational leadership program, it is my job to mentor women into leadership roles. I call on other professors in similar positions to do the same.

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