The Gendering of Educational Leadership Styles: Mentoring and the Deconstruction of Binaries that Influence Women’s Access to the Superintendency

Abstract
The proposed study will explore the mentoring experiences of female superintendents in order to determine the impact such experiences play in reproducing the gendering of leadership roles. The impact of mentoring experiences on subjectivity, agency, and women’s access to the superintendency will also be explored. Specifically, I will study the experiences of how these superintendents were/are being mentored, as well as how they have/are mentoring others. Feminist poststructuralism will serve as the theoretical lens to inquire about practices that reinforce socially constructed beliefs which associate leadership styles with gender and the extent to which these may impact access for women to the superintendency. The intent of the study is to make recommendations for improving mentoring experiences and opportunities not only for women aspiring to the superintendency, but also to identify ways that mentoring can support the work of both men and women in creating a more equitable system.

Brief Statistics
- 75% of teachers in the United States are women (Kober & Usher, 2012)
- Approximately 24.1% of superintendents in the United States are women (Kowalski, Mc Cord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011)
- In North Carolina, 15.7% of current superintendents are women (NCDPI, 2012)
- Current statistics indicate a national gap of 51.9% and North Carolina gap of 68.6% among gender representation in the superintendency

Void in Research
A feminist poststructuralist lens welcomes the opportunity to have collaborative dialogue that can change the discourse in practices that are driven by “power in a society where patriarchal relations inform the very production and regulation of female and male subjects” (Weedon, 1997, p. 108).
It is clear that in order to make lasting changes to what an organization does, both formal rules and informal norms need to change. Leaders who aim to bring about social transformation in line with feminist goals must provide the vision to challenge these institutional principles, and recognize their manifestation in organizations. (Rao & Kelleher, 2000, p. 75)
There exists little research that examines the evolving experiences of mentoring relationships and discourses among current female superintendents as they ascended to the superintendency; how those experiences influenced their subjectivity and agency; and, how they subsequently mentored other aspiring leaders. Through such research we can begin to deconstruct “hierarchical power as well as change the discourse within the structures that exist”(Rao & Kelleher, 2000, p. 75) and to provide equitable access to the positions for which women are highly qualified and in which they can provide effective leadership.

Research Questions
The proposed study will explore the following research questions:
- What have been the mentoring experiences of female superintendents as they aspired to the superintendency?
- What role has language and discourse played in mentoring relationships to disrupt or reproduce gender norms?
- How have mentoring relationships impacted study participants’ understandings of subjectivity and agency?
- How do female superintendents employ their concept of subjectivity and agency as they mentor other aspiring superintendents?
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Methodology

This is a qualitative, poststructural feminist study. Research participants will be female superintendents in North Carolina. A semi-structured interview and possible follow-up interview will be conducted at a location convenient for the participants. Poststructural feminism is grounded in the analysis of discourse and dialogue to deconstruct oppressive practices. Therefore, it is apropos to analyze the data collected in this study as a method for exploring how language and discourse may reveal patterns of hegemony in the journey to the superintendency that may be nurtured through the mentoring process.

A poststructural feminist lens will be used for intensive analysis of the data through coding and identifying patterns, themes and anomalies. This coding process will be based upon concepts that research has reported as obstacles faced by women in seeking access to the superintendency (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000; Lichtman, 2010). These concepts may include, but are not limited to, binaries associated with social norms for men and women, the discourse around leadership styles among men and women, market factors – specifically the norm of the ideal worker closely associated with gender stereotypes, and mentoring experiences (Alston, 1999; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Dobie & Hummel, 2006; Gardiner, et al., 2000; Grogan, 1999; Grogan, 2008; Kamler, 2006; Koenig et. al, 2011; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006; Scott, 2003; Shakeshaft et. al, 2007; Tallerico, 2000; Wallen & Crippen, 2007). Emerging themes regarding the impact that mentoring aspiring superintendents has upon women’s agency, subjectivity and access to the superintendency will also be explored.

Reflexivity will be a critical strategy that will be applied to increase trustworthiness of the data. It is essential to recognize that “no research is value free and that our viewpoints as researchers hold biases” (Gardiner et al., 2000, p 47). Reflexivity is that process of self-awareness regarding the influence our biases have upon the lens through which data is collected, analyzed and communicated as a researcher. I often have dialogue with others regarding my experiences and the lens through which I view the topic. Ideological researchers often seek to “formulate an approach to empirical research which both advances emancipatory theory-building and empowers the researched” (Lather1986, p. 64). I will include an interview question for each participant in how my gender and role in education influenced the interview. Responses to this question will help me critically reflect on my own positionality and its influence on the interview data. Member checking, peer review, an audit trail and the use of thick, rich description will be used as well to promote trustworthiness.

Significance of the Study

This research is primarily designed to benefit society. It is the exploration of “an alternative view of the self located historically in language, produced in everyday gendered and cultural experiences, and expressed in writing and speaking” (Bloom, 2002, p. 291) that may increase a better understanding of how mentoring experiences for women can be established and/or improved to increase access to the superintendency. It is through this access that the gap between men and women’s representation and their voices in positions of power can be narrowed. While filling that gap is not in and of itself the solution to disrupting the binaries of gender roles, Weedon (1997) acknowledges “the degree to which marginal discourses can increase their social power is governed by the wider context of social interests and power within which challenges to the dominant are made” (p. 108). It is necessary for the improvement of society that the voices being silenced, in larger numbers, have access to positions where they can influence dominant, patriarchal discourse and privilege. Johnson (2006) suggests that “privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do” (p. 21). The results of the study can provide insight into the experiences of those women who have accessed the superintendency and how these women may be influencing the opportunities of others.
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References