Rethinking Leadership Preparation: Including Women’s Voices in Course Design

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The underrepresentation of women in the superintendent’s position is a problem needing attention from the educational leadership community. Future school leaders need to know that leadership is inclusive of all voices and perspectives from their training programs to their schoolhouses. This paper presents findings from two major studies with women superintendents designed to learn about their perspectives on leadership and power and how they lead for social justice. Based on results of the research and related literature, the paper’s ultimate purpose is to make a strong call for educational leadership professors to include voices of women leaders when teaching candidates who desire to become school leaders. Feminist standpoint theory is the overarching framework for thinking about the inclusion of women leaders’ perspectives when designing coursework in educational leadership programs.
Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to call for professors in educational leadership programs to include women leaders’ voices when designing coursework for future school leader candidates. The related literature reviewed in the paper reveal some of the problems contributing to the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency as well as some of the barriers for women accessing the superintendency. Next, feminist standpoint theory is described in context as the overarching framework that professors in educational leadership programs can look toward when teaching both men and women and when mentoring women into school leader positions. The paper continues with a description of two research studies I have conducted with women superintendents. One study was a mixed method design to understand women’s perceptions of leadership and power, and the other was a qualitative study designed to learn how women support and promote social justice in their school districts. Evidence from these studies revealed that women have very definite ways to talk about how they are faring in their positions as superintendents and offer advice to aspiring women. Implications are offered for teaching and mentoring future leaders through the inclusion of women’s voices in course planning, describing important issues for mentoring women, and finally, the paper ends with a call for action.

Women in the Superintendency

Since the creation of the public school superintendency in the United States in the mid 1800s, few women have held this public leadership position. Most studies before 1998 report that males constitute more than 90 percent of all superintendent positions. Most recent figures (and the largest numbers to date) find 18% women superintendents across the U.S. (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). The question of why there are so few women in the superintendency becomes puzzling when one considers three situations. One situation has to do with the pathway toward the position of superintendent. Glass (1992) found that a typical pathway for women to the
superintendency is from the position of teacher, and then to principal, to central office position, to superintendent. Since the position of teacher is the first position held in that pathway and since women comprise approximately 75 percent of all teachers (Bell & Chase, 1993), one would expect women to hold more of the leadership positions in schools than they currently do.

The second situation concerns the increased numbers of women in graduate educational leadership programs. Research has shown that while men have historically dominated the field of educational administration, there has been an increase in female enrollment in graduate programs in educational administration (Grogan, 1996, Gupton & Slick, 1995). In school administration programs, the percentage of female students now outnumbers males. A 1997 survey of member institutions in the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) showed that 74 percent of certification programs in institutions responding to the survey had from 51 percent to 72 percent women (Logan, 1998). Results from this survey correspond to other research that shows women entering educational programs in increasing numbers since the 1970s (Grogan, 1996).

The third situation exists because there are more women in the pipeline for the superintendency as increasing numbers of women are moving into more central office positions and school principalships. Hodgkinson and Montenegro (1999) found that women occupied 33 percent of the positions of assistant, associate, deputy, or area superintendents. At 57 percent, representation of women in central office administration (such as curriculum directors and supervisors of special programs) surpasses that of men. In the principalship, women represent 20 percent at the secondary school level (still low in number) but 53 percent women reportedly are elementary school principals (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999).

There are barriers existing for women entering the superintendency. One barrier cited in the literature is the lack of role models for women and is believed to be part of the reason more
women do not get into the superintendency (Brunner, 1998b). Researchers agree that another barrier occurs when leadership is approached from a male perspective (Brunner, 1998a; Shakeshaft, 1989; Wesson & Grady, 1994a). Shakeshaft (1989) explains that educational theories developed from a male centered or androcentric framework are a result of imbalanced and inaccurate research and are not representative of the female paradigm. Campbell (1996) believes that “narrow definitions of leadership based on male models or theories need to be expanded to include women’s values, beliefs, and experiences” (p. 9).

Theoretical Framework

In this section, I address why feminist standpoint theory is used as an overarching theoretical framework for thinking about the inclusion of women leaders’ perspectives when designing coursework in educational leadership programs. Standpoint theory, emerging from feminist critical theory in the 1970s and 1980s has been proposed as an explanation as to why women are a marginalized group but also as a methodology to guide future feminist research. As a critical theory, it delves into relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power. Feminist standpoint theory has been used as a framework for empowering oppressed groups to value their experiences. Giving these groups recognition and voice can be an important source of critical insight (Harding, 2004). Feminist standpoint theorists claim that there are important things to learn from taking seriously the perspectives of all marginalized groups. Starting from their predicaments, knowledge drawn from these marginalized groups will be richer than one particular knowledge that draws only on the insights of privileged groups alone (Harding cited in Anderson, 2007a). “Views of the social world generated from the perspective of dominant interests are not false, but partial. The marginalized have contact with different aspects of social reality, aspects that are more revealing of the ways the status quo is unjust” (Hartsock cited in Anderson, 2007b, para 20).
Women superintendents reveal different aspects of social reality – aspects we need to hear, view as important, and rely upon. As professors of educational leadership programs, we must include women’s voices as examples in discussion about leadership. If we do this, we work to dispel the myth that if women are not in the position as superintendents, they must not be able to do the job. If women are disinclined to pursue the superintendency, this reluctance to aspire to the role could result from many issues. Among the issues are: the lack of role models (Brunner, 2000), external and internal barriers that are gender related (Brunner, 1998a and 1998b, Shakeshaft, 1989; Wesson & Grady, 1994), and educational theories that have developed from an androcentric (male dominated) framework and are not representative of the female paradigm (Shakeshaft, 1989). According to Brunner (2000), women have a real challenge when they take on a role that is so heavily masculinized and to make it in the role, a woman has to be very good.

**Studying Women Superintendents**

*Leadership and Power*

Skrla and colleagues (2000) stress the need for more studies of women superintendents 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). In the academic year of 1999-2000, I conducted mixed method research with women who were practicing school superintendents in four Midwestern states, n = 210. The purpose of the 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 (Katz, 2004, 2006).

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. Surveys sent consisted of demographic questions and two published inventories: the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (Kouzes and Posner, 1995) and Your Sources of Influence (Rosener, 1990) which asked questions regarding how those in powerful roles perceived their sources of influence (power). In-depth interviews were conducted with nine women who were practicing in the four states. Results from both quantitative and qualitative analyses found there were significant differences in how women perceived their leadership practices and how they perceived their uses of power.

All 210 women who were practicing superintendents in four Midwestern states (as listed on state lists) were invited to participate in the 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 from 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, 1999-2000. Table 1 displays the data concerning this profile.
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. 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. Most of the women responded that they thought many of the leadership issues they deal with on an ongoing basis were covered. They also stated that they would like to know the results of the research. 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 (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.

I asked questions about leadership and power. Additional questions asked about types of barriers that might have been factors in deciding to apply for the position and if there were barriers that created problems 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 what advice they would give to women aspiring to the position.

The women perceived themselves as successful with different patterns of a couple of the same leadership practices. Although women in large districts perceived themselves to be using Challenging the Process and Inspiring a Shared Vision (Kouzes & Posner, 1995) when responding to the survey, all the women who were interviewed used those practices in different ways. Women leading larger districts talked of involving stakeholders, shared decision making, and taking risks regarding personnel. Women leading small districts talked of involving community in bond issues for facility funding, programming issues, and taking risks regarding programs.

The women interviewed are not all cut from the same cloth; however there are certain things they had in common. They all talked about the importance of the leader maintaining high standards as they served as role models for staff, students, school board, and community members. Some of the women modeled their beliefs in championing the value of diversity, while others modeled behaviors they want followers to emulate, i.e., dignity and respect. All of the women talked about building relationships in some way, whether those relationships were at the
level of students and teachers, or at the level of a cabinet staff. Building relationships was a repeated theme in many of the answers to the interview questions.

Many of the responses to the question about defining power and influencing others emphasized referent power, using relationship to influence others. Several women mentioned the importance of “making things happen through the connection with people,” “getting people to believe,” and “moving the system forward based on relationships.” One woman mentioned that her approachability was an effective way to influence others. She said that people know she is approachable and they know she keeps an open door policy. Another participant said she believed that she used referent power to influence others and was told so by one of her assistant superintendents. Gilligan (1982) believed women’s sense of integrity is involved in an ethic of caring as women see themselves in a relationship of connection and in the activity of caring for others. Thus, women equate power with giving and care.

Supporting and Promoting Social Justice

The purpose of this study was to understand how women superintendents support and promote social justice and democratic community in their school districts (Katz, in press). I was also interested in exploring what practices the women engaged in that contribute toward social justice leadership. Looking through the lens of feminist standpoint theory, since women in the superintendency are underrepresented in the role, women superintendents might have “different aspects of social reality” (Hartsock cited in Anderson, 2007b, para 20). Questions that related to this study were: What social justice issues do women superintendents identify as problems in their school districts? What are the problems and issues women superintendents face in working toward social justice? What centers or grounds these leaders? What are their worldviews? How do background and life experiences contribute to successful leadership practices for social justice? Additionally, I wanted to find out how these women defined social justice, what
practices of internal and external stakeholders fit or did not fit with their definitions of social justice, and how they individually took and worked with staff to take responsibility for creating socially just educational environments for all their students.

To select participants, I looked at a state listing that gave names of districts, superintendents’ names, and contact information. This listing allowed access to a profile of all public school district demographics from the state website. I was interested in finding women who led districts using three differing sets of criteria: the student population in the district was diverse, and achievement scores were below the state average for disaggregated groups; the student population in the district was diverse and scores across all disaggregated groups were at or above the state average; the district had mostly students of color and the majority of the district’s teachers were White (which is not unusual in most districts). Six women superintendents practicing in school districts in a Midwestern state, mostly concentrated in a major urban area, agreed to participate in the study. Three were African American, one was American Indian, and two women were White (one grew up poor and the other’s educational career began as a teacher of the visually impaired).

Each of the six women was interviewed twice. Interviews lasted from one to two hours, were audio-taped, and transcribed verbatim. Data came from the interview transcripts, field notes, and a personal journal. Before the first interview, the interview guide was sent to each participant. When interviewing one of the women for the first time it was obvious that she wanted to talk about the issues. In fact, when I initially called her to ask if she would be a participant, she said she was very busy but that due to the issues raised in the interview guide, she would participate. Transcripts of the interviews were sent via email attachment to each of the participants after each interview for member checking. A couple of the women commented that they enjoyed reading the transcripts from the first interview. One woman seemed very excited
after reading her transcript as she said that she felt good to be able to “put into words” how she felt about the issues of social justice in her district.

As I began to read through the texts of interview transcripts, field notes, and my reflective journal, I realized that all six of the women in this study were making significant efforts and inroads to engage their communities toward the work of social justice. Because of these themes coming from the transcripts about community, I used Gail Furman’s work (2002, 2003) on community-building to ground the data analysis.

In her article, *Moral Leadership and the Ethic of Community*, Furman (2003) claims that leadership practice for social justice must be grounded in community. “. . . an ethic of community centers the community over the individual as moral agent—it shifts the locus of moral agency to the community as a whole” (p. 4). She says that educational leaders who work toward establishing the process of community in their districts should ground their work “first and foremost in interpersonal and group skills, such as listening with respect, striving for knowing and understanding others, communicating effectively, working in teams, engaging in ongoing dialogue and creating forums that allow all voices to be heard” (p. 4). All those involved in school communities, according to Furman, must develop these kinds of “communal skills and practices” (p. 4).

As the women participants defined what social justice meant to them specifically and what that definition meant for the districts they served, they drew from their backgrounds and experience in their roles as leaders, current contexts, and looked toward the future. I categorized each woman’s definition of social justice into the following themes: *no glass ceiling, individuality and common good, understanding and confronting privilege, equitable funding, the opposite of injustice, and growing the future.*
No glass ceiling means “allowing everybody equal access and taking a stand when you see that equal access is not readily available” (Karen, interview, 2005). Individuality and common good to one participant means “taking the interest of a single individual to be successful, whatever that success is defined by them.” And then providing “an environment that is conducive to all, the common good of mankind” (Fay, interview, 2005). One participant leads a wealthy suburban school district and is mindful that her staff and students need to understand and confront privilege. She told me that the adults “work very hard to help their children realize that this [school district] is maybe not a good reflection of the world” (Carmen, interview, 2005). One woman concerned about equitable funding attended a lobby day at the statehouse and she said, “. . . the way we fund education in this state [is wrong]; when we talk about social justice we are talking about fairness and what is right. It is not right to give to the haves and not to the have nots” (Corwin, interview, 2005). For one participant, social justice meant the opposite of injustice. She spoke about “human rights, human needs, fairness, meeting the needs of all, having equal access, equal opportunity, and a sense of group as opposed to individuals or clusters” (Tina, interview, 2005). Growing the future for one woman meant that “we need to provide the best we can for students living in a diverse world – since they will be responsible for our retirement and old age” (Delia, interview, 2005). The women participants used their “interpersonal and group skills” (Furman, 2003, p. 4) to work toward establishing the ethic of community by listening with respect, knowing and understanding others, communicating effectively, and creating a forum for all voices to be heard.

Collectively, I saw that these six women were “easy” with defining social justice and discussing issues in their districts that were troubling to them. One woman needed to reschedule interview appointments a couple of times but made sure that we could reschedule because as she said, “I want to do this; I have a passion for this.” Maybe they were easy with this talk because as
women seeking a position they did not have *easy* access to, they gained personal knowledge about being the “other” and thus could relate to students and families who have diverse status. Consistent with feminist standpoint theory, these women could “see” how groups were oppressed since they have not been privileged as women in gaining access to the superintendency.

Women in this study also easily talked about what centers them as they carry on their work. All six made a connection from their personal and professional history to how they proceeded with their work toward social justice. These women connected their vision for change with their personal stories and school district context. Although the districts varied by size, student population, and geographical area, all of the women had specific goals related to their vision for social justice.

Several women talked about the benefits of participating in this type of research. It allowed them to reflect on issues of social justice in their districts and what they had accomplished in dealing with these issues as leaders. Not only can we learn in general how women are progressing in the superintendency from this type of research, but specifically, we learn that this study’s participants have enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on the concepts of social justice for students, staff, and families in their schools. Several women talked about how their participation in the study has helped them reflect and question themselves about social justice issues. Drawing from this particular finding, we learn that it is good and absolutely necessary to create spaces to reflect on and to talk about social justice in schools.

*Talking About the Job*

Succeeding in the Role. Findings from the interviews of both major studies revealed that women in my research had ways to talk about how they have succeeded in their roles as superintendents. Women viewed relational leadership as a key component of their leadership.
style. Women worked to establish a process of community by creating forums that allow all voices to be heard when they strived to know and understand the diverse groups of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and ability represented in their districts. Women talked about hiring practices: hiring principals are crucial to the districts’ success, hiring a team of heterogeneous people capitalizes on different interests and abilities, and hiring people who are loyal is a must. Women talked about the qualities that a leader must have: integrity, character, strong values. Leaders must be logical thinkers, and risk takers and relentless in pursuit of their goals, all the while showing compassion for others. Examples of risk taking that women reported were the following: hiring a multicultural facilitator in a district that faced a civil rights lawsuit and “did not want to hear the term multicultural” (Interview, 2000), reapplying for a superintendency in one of the poorest districts in the state, and immediately taking on the school board initiatives for reorganization when hired as the first woman superintendent in the district. 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. 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.

One interesting finding and consistent with the literature was that women had some hesitation when asked to define and conceptualize power. Women who hold the position have difficulty talking about power (Brunner, 2000). Many of the participants in the mixed design research investigating women’s perceptions of leadership practices and power had not thought of power as a reality in their work. Once they did began to reflect on interview questions asking
about power, women said that the position did not grant them power; rather, they gained power by sharing it or giving it away – having power with people rather than over people. “I believe that when you have power with people, then you are able to accomplish your goals in a much more effective and rewarding way” (Interview, 2000). Researchers have pointed out that because women have different socialization patterns than men; they have different experiences of power (Gilligan, 1982; Helgesen, 1995; Estrich, 2000). Power in a direct form can be threatening to women; since power is a contradiction in both personal and social terms (Gilligan, 1982).

Advice to Aspiring Women. When giving direct advice to aspiring women, participants in my research 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. The quote below illustrates how one woman encouraged aspiring women to take the risk believing strongly that the job itself could be managed by women.

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 is 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 (Interview, 2000).

One woman gave advice from her standpoint that women are naturally situated to manage due to family responsibilities, women’s teaching experiences and roles in curriculum and instruction, and women’s leadership styles. She elaborated on 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 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 (Interview, 2000).
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 in their school communities. One woman pointed out that she increased collaboration among her staff as they told her before she became the superintendent, that 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 her influence “. . . the conversation between the staff has increased, has grown, has developed, has emerged” (Interview, 2000).

Among the ideas to encourage aspiring women was talk about what was needed 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] 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]’ and I was like, ‘whatever, you’ll get used to me, I’m here to stay.’ And you build your own credibility with them (Interview, 2000).

Several women gave advice and encouragement to aspiring women 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.

Results of the 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 that they enjoy 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 the mixed method 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 (Interview, 2000).

Implications for Teaching Future Leaders

Including Women’s Voices

Reports of this type of research can be used by professors of educational leadership programs to acquaint their students with firsthand accounts of how women are leading their districts and how they describe their work lives in the top job in education. Researchers (Bjork and Adams-Rodgers, 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 (1998a) 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.

The reliance in educational leadership programs on theories of leadership developed by men and from the framework of the white, male, heterosexual is problematic and is not indicative of women and members of other groups leading schools. Wilson (2004) advocates for a redefinition of culturally accepted definitions and perceptions of leadership. Professors of educational leadership need to be aware that other leadership theories have been developed that are inclusive of women and other groups. For example, the synergistic leadership theory developed by Irby, Brown, Duffy, and Trautman (2002) provides an alternative to the traditionalist leadership theories that have been criticized as androcentric (male-centered). Synergistic leadership theory is inclusive of female perspectives, but applicable to both male and female leaders. The theory is relational and interactive and was developed as a useful framework based upon a model with the following four key factors for building and understanding interdependent relationships: (a) leadership behavior, (b) organizational structure, (c) external forces, and (d) attitudes, values, and beliefs.

**Mentoring Issues**

Professors in educational leadership programs need to be aware of issues for women and other groups regarding mentoring. Our educational leadership candidates are aspiring to be school leaders. Certainly, they will most likely begin their school leadership careers as assistant principals, department chairs, or supervisors of specific programs in schools. A superintendency position is most likely one of the last positions in the pathway of school leadership careers. Our
students must have good beginnings and one of the best ways for us to ensure that this happens is to be good mentors in leader preparation programs.

Drawing from the mentoring literature particularly looking at mentoring graduate students, Rose (2003) states that overall, the two most important things mentors can do for graduate students are to communicate clearly and effectively, and to provide honest feedback. In *Peer Mentoring in Post-Secondary Education: Implications for Research and Practice*, Budge (2006) quotes researchers who say that mentoring can positively influence students’ career choices, their perseverance in following their educational goals, and their achievement in higher education. Other researchers that Budge relies on in her article agree that “one of the main benefits of mentoring women is that women perceive mentoring as critical to the development of their career” (p. 77). Because traditional mentoring has not typically included individuals of other groups, minority populations are in even more need of mentoring. Traditional mentoring is most often described as an informal relationship between two white men – the mentor is older and more experienced. Nontraditional mentoring encompasses any other type of relationship different from that model (Budge, 2006, p. 79).

Some of the women participants in my research who were in their late 50s and in their first superintendency wished they had been mentored to pursue the role at an earlier age. One participant in my research advised women seeking a superintendency to have “trusted friends you can call on for a sounding board.” This is good advice; however, in many instances women have had to rely on men to mentor them since there aren’t many women in the position. If this current trend of too few women in the superintendency continues, men will need to know how to mentor women into the role. Many of the women I interviewed had men who mentored them into the superintendency and continue as their mentors into their careers. However, there are problems associated with cross-mentoring that we need to be aware of. In her literature review
Budge (2006) found that many authors who address cross-gender mentoring “theorize or have analyzed results that show cross-gender mentoring to be unsupportive and dysfunctional” (p. 77). Women mentees may feel some uneasiness if the mentoring relationship is seen as sexual and publicly scrutinized. Female role models appear to be more important for women than for men. Budge quotes research concluding that female mentor/female mentee combinations might also open up space for more assertiveness and inventiveness by mentees. However, on a more positive note for cross-gender and cross-cultural mentoring, in these relationships, mentors and mentees report a mutual examination of stereotypes and improved communication (Budge, 2006).

**Conclusion: Call to Action**

Educational leadership professors need to think about many of the issues coming out of research with women school superintendents. Women in the research discussed in this paper have said: we are suited to lead and we would not change our career paths if we had to do it all over again. The inclusion of women’s voices into the landscape of educational leadership literature now needs to come into the classroom. Educational leadership professors need to mentor women into the field, mentor women into educational leadership positions leading to the superintendency, and consider the implications for future male leaders who will be mentors for women who won’t need to say: “I wish I had pursued the position earlier in my career” (Interview, 2000).

As professors designing coursework in educational leadership programs, we need to draw on research with women who are in the role as superintendents. It is this research that gives voice to women who tell us what external and internal barriers they have faced in attaining their positions, how they are faring in their roles as superintendents (many who are the first woman superintendent in the district), what the challenges are to remain in their positions, and what they
recommend to those in the pipeline for the job. Our women candidates in educational leadership programs are in the pipeline. Skrla (1998) makes a case for more studies of women in the role because “. . . as such studies accumulate, researchers and practitioners should move towards a better understanding of women’s work lives as superintendents” (p. 5). Reports of this type of research can be used by professors of educational leadership programs to acquaint their students with firsthand accounts of how women describe their work lives in the top job in education.

As I strive to mentor women who are my students into those top leadership positions in education, I can draw on the stories I have heard, and hope to keep hearing. I can offer up examples of what women have to say about leading others by sharing power and giving it away, leading by making those connections with people, and establishing communities that are able to learn about and appreciate diverse points of view and ways of knowing. Brunner (2000) in her extensive study of 12 women superintendents felt that her participants “in their caring practice and heartfelt perceptions” (p. 36) could change the way all people—men and women—perform in the position. I feel the same way after conducting research into the work lives of women superintendents.
References


