

You Go, Girl: Shrinking Gender Gap Paves Way for Female Superintendents

Chelsea Ireland

Introduction

Does gender affect leadership in education? Why are there disproportionately fewer female superintendents? Does the glass ceiling still exist in its original form? Research shows that, while challenges exist for female superintendents, the gender gap has closed significantly since the 1990s. However, there is still a large disparity between the number of male and female superintendents and school leaders.

Traditional Gender Roles in Education

Eagly and Johnson (1990) released a study that underscored stereotypical gender leadership roles. According to this study, women lead more democratically than men (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). A 2003 study found that “women’s styles are more transformational and tend to engage in more contingent reward behavior than men” (Northouse, 2013, p. 351). Many women have to face the stereotype that “women take care and men take charge” (Northouse, 2013, p. 358). Traditional gender stereotypes can also lead to “cross-pressures” for women in leadership roles (Northouse, 2013, p. 359). These cross-pressures include the notion that, as leaders, women should be strong and even masculine, but as women they should not be “too manly” (Northouse, 2013, p. 362). Furthermore, women must appear competent while also feminine (Northouse, 2013, p. 362). Some research supports “small differences in leadership style and effectiveness;” however, many studies show that “gender has little or no relationship to leadership style and effectiveness” (Northouse, 2013, p. 350).

A meta-analysis of forty-five studies of leadership conducted by Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and Van Engen (2003) found that female leaders are more transformational than men. The researchers determined “men have been described

as being command-and-control managers, decisive, aggressive, risk takers, assertive, competent, confident, self-directed and strong while women have been perceived to be indecisive, unaggressive, incompetent, not risk takers and weak” (Eagly et al. 2003, p. 263).

Gender and Leadership: Historical Context and the 1990s

The superintendency has historically been a male-dominated profession; however, several shifts have occurred. “From 1919 until 1950, women held 10% of all superintendent positions across the nation” (Long, 2010, p. 1). After World War II, there was a significant drop in the number of female superintendents. This decrease was largely due to the fact that the government authorized a bill to provide education for returning veterans. As the superintendency became increasingly male dominated once again, education entered a period known as “the Normalization of the Superintendency” (Long, 2010, p. 2). The main mission of superintendents became more bureaucratic and managerially focused. During this period, the number of female county superintendents dropped from 718 in 1950 to 366 by 1970 (Long, 2010, p. 2).

In 1986 the Wall Street Journal coined the phrase “glass ceiling” to refer to the challenges for women in obtaining leadership positions. Today, there still remains a clear lack of representation of women in roles of leadership. Researchers have several explanations for why this leadership gap exists. One study determined that this is a “pipeline problem” in which women have “less human capital investment in education, training, and work experiences than men” (Northouse, 2013, p. 354). Furthermore, if women take time off for personal or for family reasons, re-entry can be extremely difficult (Northouse, 2013, p. 355). Other studies show that women have fewer developmental

opportunities and are also less likely to receive encouragement (Northouse, 2013, p. 356). Some studies refer to a “glass cliff” for women, as opposed to a glass ceiling (Northouse, 2013, p. 356). The glass cliff refers to the fact women are more likely to be given precarious leadership positions. Furthermore, women are more likely to serve as informal leaders within the schools (Northouse, 2013, p. 357).

Today’s Superintendency

Differences in Male and Female Paths to the Superintendency

There is a significant disparity between the number of female and male superintendents within our country. A ten-year study completed by the American Association of School Administrators reported that “while the number of female superintendents is on the rise, at the current rate of change it will take more than three decades before women achieve parity with men in the superintendent ranks” (Holland, 2011). Furthermore, female superintendents have many notable distinctions from their male counterparts in terms of their career paths.

While eighty-four percent of the teaching workforce was female in 2011, only twenty-four percent of the nation’s superintendents were female (Holland, 2011). In addition to this disparity, a 2005 study completed by Bjork and Kowalski revealed that, of those female superintendents, more than sixty percent of women taught and served as administrators in an elementary school level. Their male peers were more likely to spend their teaching careers at a high school level, a position that has been labeled by many as an inherent “stepping stone” to the superintendency (Long, 2010, p. 32).

Other differences in career pathways exist between male and female superintendents. Women are more likely to teach for longer periods prior to becoming administrators. Forty percent of male superintendents in Bjork and Kowalski’s (2005) survey had spent five years or less in the classroom. Forty percent of women, however, spent ten or more years in the classroom. Furthermore, women spend more time in academia than their male counterparts. In this study, 58 percent of women

majoring in education in their undergraduate degrees compared to 38 percent of their male colleagues. Forty-seven percent of women surveyed had earned their doctorate degree, while 36 percent of male superintendents had completed the same level of study.

Rationale for Lack of Female Superintendents

Many researchers, including Bjork and Kowalski (2005) note that there is a lack of national research on the topic of female superintendents. However, one of the most often cited studies is the American Association of School Administrator’s 2000 study of female superintendents. The AASA studied superintendents over a ten-year period. Researchers created a ninety-item survey and had a sample of 2,262 superintendents. The sample was comprised of those who responded to the survey, which may have had an affect on the sample. For example, what types of responses could they have received from those who chose not to participate? Why did they choose not to respond? Of the 2,262 educators who responded, 297 were female superintendents.

The AASA found seven answers for the “phenomenon” of minimal female superintendents. The first reason is that “women are not normally in positions that lead to the superintendency” (Glass, 2000, p. 2). Glass noted that 130 of the 297 female superintendents surveyed were former elementary school teachers. Elementary positions are less likely to lead to superintendency (Glass, 2000; Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). Furthermore, Glass illuminated another pathway that typically leads to administrative roles: coaching positions. These opportunities are less available to elementary teachers and are, therefore, pursued by fewer women.

The AASA also found that women are “not gaining superintendent’s credentials in preparation programs” (Glass, 2000, p. 2). The third rationale for the lack of women represented in the superintendency is that “women are not as experienced nor as interested in district-wide fiscal management as men” (Glass, 2000, p. 2). A third of the women surveyed stated that their school boards hired them to serve as instructional leaders, while

only 24 percent of men responded with the same rationale.

The fourth rationale determined by this study is that “women are not interested in the superintendency for personal reasons” (Glass, 2000, p. 3). Glass argued that some of this is due to that fact that most women spend their careers in an elementary setting, where there is less after school commitments such as sporting events. Motherhood is another major personal hindrance to pursuing this role. Dan Domenech, executive director of the AASA, noted that this clearly demonstrates gender bias, but “personal reasons” was nonetheless a response for why there are less female superintendents.

The AASA also found that school boards are reluctant to hire female superintendents:

Nearly 82 percent of women superintendents in the AASA study indicated school board members do not see them as strong managers and 76 percent felt school boards did not view them as capable of handling district finances. Sixty-one percent felt that a glass ceiling existed in school management, which lessened their chances of being selected (Glass, 2000, p. 3).

Of the male superintendents surveyed, 43 percent agreed that school boards tended to view women as “incapable of managing a school district” (Glass, 2000, p. 3). Domenech stated, “There is still a gender bias regarding women when it comes to the selection of a superintendent of schools. It probably is very similar to the glass ceiling that exists in corporate America” (Holland, 2011).

The AASA study notes two final reasons for the lack of female superintendents: “women enter the field of education for different purposes” and “women enter too late” (Glass, 2000). This study notes that contemporary women who have the desire to be an organizational leader are moving into the private sector, rather than pursuing a career in education. Many women who enter education are doing so in order to teach children and not to become leaders. The study, and the 2005 study completed by Bjork and Kowalski, noted that

women teach longer than men, thus there is less time for them to move up in their career:

Most men start the process at about age 27, which is not true for women who later move into the superintendency. The latter usually make their break from teaching into the first administrative post in their early 30s. Many potential women candidates for the superintendency might reach the central office in their early 50s and really don't want to proceed further or move into a new career since retirement is just four or five years away (Glass, 2000, p. 4).

The AASA outlines four solutions to help alleviate the disproportionate number of female superintendents, many of which are unrealistic. For example, one recommendation is that “states and higher education institutions should provide incentives to women to gain the superintendent’s certificate” (Glass, 2000, p. 5). In my opinion, this will just perpetuate the problem and is unfair to men interested in pursuing the superintendency. While challenges still exist for women in the superintendency, much has improved since this 2000 study, and certainly since the 1990s.

Shrinking Gender Gap

The environment has changed dramatically in the last three decades for women interested in pursuing leadership opportunities within education. Holland (2011) captured this shift, noting that the “gender gap is narrowing in ranks of school chiefs.” In this article, Holland interviewed several women who pursued the superintendency during less tolerant times. Linda Henke, superintendent of the Maplewood-Richmond Heights School District, pursued her administrative degree in the 1980s. She recalls being one of two women in her class. “I still remember, just as clear as day,” Henke recalled, “one of the professors saying, ‘OK, does everybody understand this concept? Do you two girls get it?’” She acknowledges that the culture has improved significantly since this time period.

While the AASA’s study underlined many challenges faced by female superintendents, it also illustrates that “the percentage of female superintendents has increased nearly four times

from what it was in 1992” (Holland, 2011). "I find it to be exciting that more women are willing to step forth and that more boards of education are willing to recognize the leadership and the skills that women bring to the position," said Gay Tompkins, one of Illinois's first female superintendents (Holland, 2011).

A study by Long (2010) also reveals that the gender gap is shrinking with regards to the superintendency. In his dissertation, Long sought to prove that salary differences existed between male and female superintendents. His study included 121 participants within four regions of the United States. The first stage of the study was a questionnaire, after which twelve male superintendents and twelve female superintendents participated in an interview. Upon completion of his study, Long was forced to conclude that “there were no major differences in salary for male and female superintendents when they have similar educational attainment and educational experience” (Long, 2010, p. ii).

Conclusion

There has been much interesting research done with regards to gender and leadership styles. Many studies have found differences between male and female leaders, but others determine that these differences rely too much on stereotypical gender roles. Ultimately, “effective leadership is marked by an androgynous mixture of traits including intelligence, social skills, initiative and the ability to persuade” (Northouse, 2013, p. 357). With regards to women in leadership roles in education, why are there such a disproportionate number of women in these positions? While the majority of the field of education is comprised of women, females hold less than half of the leadership positions. However, this gender gap is beginning to shrink. While challenges exist for female superintendents, the gender gap has closed significantly since the 1990s and, thus, the disproportionate number of female superintendents should reflect this improved climate.

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