DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 639 EA 028 100

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TITLE "Back Talk" from a Woman Superintendent: Just How Useful Is Research?
PUB DATE 97
NOTE 26p.; This paper will be published in Brunner, C. C., Ed. Sacred Dreams: Women and the Superintendency. New York, State University of New York Press, 1998.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role; Educational Administration; Elementary Secondary Education; Females; Interprofessional Relationship; Leadership; *Leadership Qualities; *Leadership Styles; Sex Bias; Sex Stereotypes; *Superintendents; *Women Administrators

ABSTRACT

Although empirical research in the area of educational administration is plentiful, often it seems to be of little practical use. This paper presents findings of a study that examined the usefulness of a framework of collective solutions, or strategies for success, for women superintendents. A single-case qualitative study of one female superintendent was used to capture her reaction to the framework, which had been developed from a previous study of 12 women superintendents. The earlier study found that although women did not appear to assign importance to the fact that they were women, they articulated and carried out gender-specific strategies. The positional power of the superintendent did not eliminate the need for gendered strategies for success. Findings of the single-case study not only altered the framework, but also enhanced understanding of the original interpretations. Three of the original seven success strategies were altered. The new strategies include: (1) there are numerous approaches to balancing a role-related and a gender-related set of expectations; (2) women superintendents need to develop the ability to remain "feminine" in the ways they communicate and are heard in a masculinized culture; and (3) women superintendents should disregard the myth that they must "act like a man" while in a male role. The unchanged strategies are: (1) women superintendents need to focus on their primary purpose, which is the care of children and strict attention to their academic achievement; (2) remove or let go of anything that blocks their success; (3) remain fearless, courageous risk takers who have a plan of retreat when faced with the impossible; and (4) share power and credit with others. (Contains 27 references.) (LMI)

"BACK TALK" FROM A WOMAN SUPERINTENDENT: JUST HOW USEFUL IS RESEARCH?

(This paper will be published in Brunner, C. C. (Ed.) (1998). Sacred dreams: Women and the superintendency. New York: State University of New York Press.)

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July 17, 1997

"BACK TALK" FROM A WOMAN SUPERINTENDENT: JUST HOW USEFUL IS RESEARCH?

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Although empirical research in the area of educational administration is plentiful, often it seems to be of little practical use. In fact, I remember reading research when I was a public school administrator and asking myself, "How am I supposed to use this?" Thus, my goal as a researcher is to make my work useful and practical for the people I study. To that end, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the usefulness of a framework that emerged from my interpretations of data gathered in qualitative research (Brunner 1997). The original study drew on the insights of 12 women superintendents who were considered successful in their roles by those around them. The framework I developed emerged from the data gathered and defined "strategies for success" for women superintendents.

To begin testing the practical usefulness of the "strategies for success" framework, I enlisted the assistance of a woman superintendent not included in the original study -- Dr. Debra Jackson. I designed a single-case qualitative study to capture her reaction to the framework. This chapter reflects changes in my thinking that were provoked by her "back talk." My purpose in doing this is to begin a larger conversation with practicing women superintendents articulating useful "collective solutions" (see Chase 1995) for the individual gender-related problems that they face while in their positions. The framework and Dr. Jackson's "back talk" is a beginning point for that conversation.

A Single-Case Qualitative Study

In doing this study, my intent was to gather narrative data in the same manner as in my earlier interviews. First, I interviewed (twice) a woman superintendent, Dr. Debra Jackson, who was not a subject of the first study. I used the same non-standardized, free-flowing format (Patton 1980; Guba and Lincoln 1981) that I used in the original study.

Next, I gave Dr. Jackson a copy of her two transcribed 60-minute interviews so she could reshape her responses if she wished. Finally, I gave her a copy of a paper that reported the results of my interpretation and organization of her data. This completed the first part of the study.

The Participant

At the time of the first interview (April, 1996), Dr. Debra Jackson, a Hungarian-Italian American, was 41 years-old. She had been superintendent of a Northeastern school district (800 students) for four years. At the time of the second interview (Fall, 1996), she had been hired to head a district, in the same region, that had 1600 students. Her career history followed this path: admissions counselor (1977-78), art teacher (1978-80), project director in gifted education (1980-82), curriculum coordinator (1980-83), elementary school principal (1984-89), assistant superintendent of schools (1989-92), superintendent (1992-present). She earned her Masters Degree in Administration, Policy, and Urban Education in 1981 and her Doctorate in Education in 1990.

I selected Dr. Jackson as the participant because of her interest in not only my research, but also her interest in research in general. In addition, collaboration with her was logistically convenient because she and I attend research organizations such as the University Council of Educational Administration and American Educational Research Association. Further, she is quite active in professional organizations including the American Association of School Administrators. Because of her intellectual contribution to organizations that focus on both theory and practice, she was an ideal participant.

The Analysis

Because the framework of strategies for success had been established in the original study, I was able to go directly to the stage of categorizing units of the new data gathered from Dr. Jackson. The second stage of analysis was done collaboratively by Dr. Jackson and I. This collaborative analysis (Lather 1991) emerged during in-depth discussions (recorded and transcribed) and was focused on the usefulness of the "strategies for success" framework as collective solutions for all women superintendents. These discussions -- labeled "Researcher/ Practitioner Dialogue" -- are also reflected in this chapter. (One of these discussions was held at the annual meeting of University Council of Educational Administrators and is explained in depth in Margaret Grogan's Chapter 12.)

The Framework -- Strategies for Success

I began my original research with women superintendents (Brunner 1997) by suggesting that there is a need to identify strategies for success specifically for women superintendents. "Success" -- for the purposes of the study -- was defined as "being not only capable and effective in the role, but also well-liked and supported by others who knew or worked for the superintendent." Using qualitative methods aimed at understanding the narrative data, the study drew on the insights of 12 women superintendents and 24 people who knew them. The study yielded seven significant findings, in seven "strategies for success" found in the practice of women superintendents. While many of these findings may be sound advice for anyone wishing to succeed in an administrative position, each one is specifically related to gender as an issue associated with the position of superintendent of schools. The seven strategies for success were drawn from the work the women superintendents in the study had done to manage the complex expectations confronting women in the superintendency (p. 31).

The seven strategies arrived at in the original study were stated as follows:

1. Women superintendents need to learn to balance role-related expectations with gender-related ones.

2. Women superintendents need to keep their agendas simple in order to focus on their primary purpose: the care of children, including strict attention to academic achievement.
3. Women superintendents need to develop the ability to be "culturally bilingual."
4. Women superintendents need to "act like a woman."
5. Women superintendents need to remove or let go of anything that blocks their success.
6. Women superintendents need to be fearless, courageous, "can do" risk takers. At the same time, they need to have a plan for retreat when faced with the impossible.
7. Women superintendents need to share power and credit. (Brunner 1997, 31)

Drawing on what I learned from the original study, I concluded "that although on the surface women in the superintendency did not appear to be paying attention to the fact that they are women, [the] study found the reverse. The women in the [original] study articulated and carried out gender-specific strategies which created, in part, their support while in the superintendency" (p. 31). My findings agreed with the assertions of Susan Chase (1995), who found that "women superintendents fully acknowledge their continuous subjection to gendered and racial inequalities in the profession. . . ." (p. xi).

Dr. Debra Jackson and "Strategies for Success"[1]

The following section of the paper shares Dr. Debra Jackson's narrative data, organized under the seven categories and compared and contrasted to the narratives of the women superintendents in the original study. (Dr. Jackson's narratives are in italics.)

Strategy 1: Learn to balance role-related expectations with gender-related ones.

The women in the original study, in one way or another, communicated that one requirement for succeeding in the superintendency was a keen awareness of what they were expected to do and be. They repeatedly discussed the importance of knowing that expectations included not only those required of all superintendents, whether male or female, but also additional

ones related to their gender. The women in the study said that to be successful they must address both sets of expectations -- expectations which often resulted in contradictory experiences of power and subjection (Chase 1995). As I learned in the study, their ability to recognize and reconcile contradictory expectations and experiences was the ground on which they constructed their individual strategies for success. A woman from a large district spoke directly to this point:

> I think that expectations of the people around me are different [because I am a woman]. I think when you put a female in a position that has been predominantly held by men, the expectation in the business community is to see a man. And when they see a woman, their expectation is that she is to do everything the female of the culture has always done -- that is to pay attention to detail, to be caring, to do everything you would expect a female to do. Plus, the expectation is that she will also do what you expect the man to do. And I think a board member will ask a female superintendent to do things he/she would never even consider asking a male superintendent to do.

Researcher/Practitioner Dialogue While Dr. Jackson agreed that strategy #1 was useful in specific settings, she wasn't convinced that it held true in all situations. She gave specific examples of when she felt the force of these expectations. She believed, as did the women in the original study, that during group meetings of superintendents there were things expected of her that were not expected of her male colleagues. She was often the only woman in the group, so differences in expectations were obvious to her. She also felt that requirements for women during the selection process were different than those for men. Other areas where Dr. Jackson noted gender-related expectations as well as role-related expectations are reflected in her narratives analyzed under the other six strategies for success.

On the other hand, she believed that the role-related expectations were the same for both men and women. That is, that they were not altered because a woman was in the position. As she said:

> *I think on the job, I don't believe there are differences with regards to requirements.*

Strategy 2: Keep your agenda simple in order to focus on your primary purpose -- the care and development of children, including strict attention to academic achievement.

The women superintendents in the original study repeatedly emphasized how they had to simplify their work and lives in order to focus on their primary purpose for being in the position -- children. Here's a statement by one woman superintendent that is representative of the other women in that study:

> I measure success by the fact that 73% of the kids in our city graduated from high school the year I came, 81% graduate today. I measure success by the fact that we have many alternative schools where kids are getting degrees now instead of being out on the streets or in the jails. I don't feel successful because too many youngsters who have not been successful in academic areas are minority youngsters. I am still having real difficulty in getting our people in our elementary schools to believe that poor youngsters can learn. . . . I worry . . . about the children -- somebody's got to be responsible.

Dr. Jackson's primary purpose in her position was the same as that of the women in the original study. She focused on the children in her district. Everything on her agenda came back to that, and she kept her agenda simple:

> *I make decisions based on how we can best make a difference for students. I bring everything back to that all the time.*

When talking about making decisions based on what is best for the students, she noted the source of her motivation:

> *[A]ctually I make decisions based on my belief system. . . .*

Dr. Jackson also reported that decisions made based on "caring for children" were often not easy to make:

> *I've made some very tough decisions as superintendent, and it comes down to [students] every time. Not what everyone might have to say, but what is best for those students.*

Like the women studied in my original research, Dr. Jackson's agenda was simplified by viewing everything through the lenses of "what best served the students":

Being a superintendent means doing what's best for the students in the district.

Researcher/Practitioner Dialogue Dr. Jackson was in agreement with my analysis of her narrative. She believes that this strategy is central to her role as superintendent, in fact, central to the role of superintendent whether a man or woman is in the position.

Strategy 3: Develop the ability to be culturally bilingual.

This strategy is complex and disturbing. Due to space limitations, the discussion in this section is only a brief summary. (For a fuller discussion, see the paper devoted entirely to this strategy -- Brunner 1996)

The differences between men and women associated with communication require women to be what I termed "culturally bilingual" in the original study. I defined this term to refer to women's ability to remain "feminine," in the classical sense, while communicating in a "masculinized" culture. The women superintendents in the original study agreed they were expected not only to know the somewhat foreign male-defined language in the primarily male culture of the superintendency in order to meet role-related expectations, but also to communicate in a "feminine" way in order to meet gender-related expectations (see Bolinger 1980; Gilligan 1983; Reardon 1995; Tannen 1986, 1990, 1994a, 1994b; Wolfe 1994). Data related to communication in the original study fell into four categories: 1) Silenced by the Term "Power;" 3) Overt Silencing; 2) Listening/Silence; 4) Ways of Communicating to be Heard. The last two categories reveal ways that the women superintendents were communicating in a masculine culture while remaining feminine.

Listening/Silence Most of the women in the original study used silence (did not talk as much as they would have liked) to be accepted by their male peers, and they listened because they believed it respectful and important for gathering input. Consider the strategy used by one women in the original study:

> When I was first in administration, I found myself mainly in the "quiet persistence" category. All of my colleagues were the good old boys type males. That was the way to get an entry -- was to attend the meetings. . . . They didn't know how to deal with me. So I found that what was most useful was to sit and listen. Then quietly persist in getting my point across. For example, I would say, "We talked about doing so and so, and if we should. . . ." And I would repeat what I wanted to say -- persistently pursue -- what I thought was important.

Dr. Jackson also spoke of the need to listen to people, specifically in order to get their input. She stated that others viewed her as someone who was "*always ready to listen.*" She also talked about her natural tendency to be quiet, "*I'm a very quite person. I am someone who really is probably more introverted than extroverted.*" She elaborated:

> *My decisions are usually based on what's best for students and from the perspective of listening to others and gathering as much information about other's standpoints as I possibly can.*

Ways of Communicating to be Heard Even with the complications around silence and voice, women superintendents in the original study had ways to be heard. First, they stated that being "direct" was too harsh. One woman said, "Women can't be directive or before long they are called bitches. So if women want to stay in power they have to find a way to circumvent by using a softer style." Dr. Jackson also talked about the association between "being direct" and being authoritarian:

> *I'm not seen as being authoritarian or direct. I associate "direct" with being authoritarian.*

Second, they talked about using others (men) as spokespersons in order that their voices be heard. A woman in the original study talked about how she used men to speak for her when the mayor wouldn't listen to her because she was a woman:

> The mayor that came in was much more adversarial toward the school district and the gender issue was difficult. I'm really not sure how comfortable he is working with a

> woman in authority, so I've tried to utilize the building-and-grounds people (men) to network with him in order to find his comfort level. And there's been much more progressive, positive communication between the two groups lately.

Dr. Jackson mentioned a similar strategy:

> *And sometimes the approach is to get other people involved when you know that certain things need to come [from someone else] because that's part of what they want. They become the spokesperson on this issue that we worked on. I get them to be the voice if necessary. It's [the spokesperson is] not always me.*

In this particular comment Dr. Jackson separated herself from the notion that her voice needed to be used to express her idea. She stated that "the voice was still heard. It wasn't silenced." This separation may have allowed her to discount the fact that someone else's voice expressed her idea and, in the end, may have been credited for the idea. Although, I would have categorized the need to have someone else speak for me as "overt silencing," the woman in the original study and Dr. Jackson viewed it as a strategy for being heard.

Researcher/Practitioner Dialogue I asked Dr. Jackson to talk about the notion of the need for women to be culturally bilingual because of all the issues around talking and being heard. She noted that anything she did -- if it was being culturally bilingual or anything else -- was "just her" rather than a conscious effort. This was true for the women in my previous study as well.

On one hand, Dr. Jackson didn't think that she was culturally bilingual because she paid attention to the type of language that other people used and she was different than the men around her. She said, "There are people out there who use a real business language, and I absolutely work against that." In this case, she misunderstood "culturally bilingual" to mean that she spoke the same style of language as the male culture of the superintendency -- "a real business language."

After thinking about Dr. Jackson's response to the term culturally bilingual, I decided that the it was too laden with other meanings and, therefore, unclear. Since clarity is essential when communicating with others, I decided to articulate differently. I stated it as follows: Women

superintendents need to develop the ability to remain "feminine" in the ways they communicate and at the same time be heard in a masculine culture.

Strategy 4: Women superintendents need to remember to "act like a woman."

Success Strategy 4 describes the ways in which women in the original study incorporated their traditionally feminine behavior into their roles as superintendents. They acknowledged that their roles as superintendents were most often defined by "masculinized" (in the classical sense) behavior and that it was easy to be confused about what behavior was expected of them -- whether they should behave in a "feminine" or "masculine" way. It was crucial to resolve this dilemma. As one woman flatly stated, "Women who act like men: it doesn't work." Once aware of this "truth," the women in the original study recognized that they needed to be "comfortable with the fact" that they were women in male roles but they continue to "act like women" anyway. Role-related expectations were subordinated to gender-related expectations as the strategy for success. As one superintendent put it:

> I believe people who are here [in this position] are comfortable with the fact that they are women by the time they have reached the position. They have foregone the struggle with believing that they must be thinking like or looking like a man.

Dr. Jackson's comments lead me to believe that she agreed with the women in the original study. When talking about whether she felt that she needed to "act like a man" in her position, she stated, "I don't. If anything, that would tend to be more of a problem for me than it would seem." She asserted that instead of thinking about how a man would act in the position of superintendent, she felt that women just had to have very strong belief systems to drive their actions:

> *I think there are people out there who are always going to pull at what you're not. But I'd say that it would be a problem for me to [act like a man]. Especially when it would mean that I'm not true to myself. . . . I believe being yourself is really being strong about what you believe you need to do in order to accomplish what your tasks are. . . . But I don't think that means acting more like a man. Although I've heard that time and time again.*

Some of the women superintendents in the original study were more vehement than Dr. Jackson about this topic. They not only expressed that it didn't work to "act like a man," but they also stated that it was important to "act like a woman." Dr. Jackson, on the other hand, continued to come back to "being herself" as the measure of what was appropriate.

In the original study, one of the most important ways in which the women superintendents "acted like women" was articulated by a woman superintendent in a discussion about relationships. She said "that a female . . . is responsible for the caring of all employees and students." Most of the women in the original study strongly emphasized the high priority they placed on caring relationships[2] (see Beck 1994; Noddings 1984; Purpel 1989) with and among their employees, colleagues, parents, and students. One open woman said:

> The members of the staff are so dear [original emphasis] to me. For the most part I guess my success is in being able to hang on to the development of some kind of relationship in this crazy time in public education.

Her next comment made it clear just how much she relied on her relationships with the people in her district. She said, "If I am successful, I really believe it is because I have such [original emphasis] successful people that make me look good."

Dr. Jackson had another view. She thought that paying attention to relationships was a role-related expectation rather than a gender-related expectation. She believed that men superintendents who she knew paid as much attention to relationships as she did. For example:

> *In one of my previous job interviews, the acting man superintendent was sharing with me that he has taken some time off just to spend some time with a staff member who was really upset and really just needed to have him be an ear. You know lots of times we're an ear for someone, we're a help. I mean this gentleman was an ex-coach, ex-tough guy, and it was still a big part of what he did.*

What I learned from Dr. Jackson was that, from her perspective, attention to relationships was an important part of the role of superintendent. She cast it in the set of expectations related to her role rather than in the set of expectations related to gender. The women in the original study

would probably agree with her, with the additional note that they felt that they were expected to attend to relationships more than men superintendents, thus casting this expectation in the gender-related category as well.

Researcher/Practitioner Dialogue Dr. Jackson was uncomfortable with this strategy even though she agreed with the women in the earlier study that "acting like a man" didn't work. I suspect for her the key word was "acting." I came to understand that she didn't want to "act" like anyone or anything, she just wanted to "be herself" which for her meant being a professional woman superintendent -- a complex description. To be told to "act like a woman" by society or anyone else was not, it seemed, to her liking.

Perhaps this strategy needs to be expressed differently. Certainly the women in the original work were not "acting" when they were "being women." It is helpful to understand that they, too, were expressing the complexity of being women in a male role. Most agreed, however, that "acting like a man" didn't work. The only other choice is to "act like a woman" or perhaps more correctly stated "to be the woman you are."

I have come to understand that in order to remove the uncomfortable and oppressive language, this strategy should be articulated as follows: Women superintendents need to disregard the old myth that they must "act like a man" while in a male role. It doesn't work.

Strategy 5: Remove or let go of anything that blocks your success.

While the role-related expectation to "remove or let go of anything that blocks your success" is appropriate for anyone wishing to succeed in the superintendency, additional gender-related blocks for women in the original study existed and needed to be addressed. I learned that one potential block involved the risk of damage to their dignity and integrity because of issues related to sexual conduct. They understood that their presence in what had been commonly called the "old boys' network" created some discomfort for their male colleagues. Rather than allowing complexity to develop around issues of sexual conduct, they set the ground rules in a simple, straightforward way from the beginning in order to remove any potential threats to their reputations and future success.

Some of the women talked about the things that they "let go of" as part of this strategy to be successful superintendents. For example, the most common focus of discussions was the difficulty faced in intimate relationships. Several of the women told me, with sadness, about their marriages -- and in several cases the demise of marriages -- and the dilemma facing the men in their lives. The women felt that because of societal expectations, most men had difficulty accepting the fact that their "wives" were filling the masculinized role of superintendent of schools and often were primary wage earners. Because of this difficulty and others, for some women "letting go of blocks to their success" meant losing their husbands or partners rather than giving up their careers to save their marriages or intimate relationships.

Fortunately, Dr. Debra Jackson hasn't faced a divorce because of her career choice. In fact, she talked about her husband's understanding of her need to have a certain kind of life or career when she said:

> *But, I do know one thing. I think he [her husband] recognized early on that I have to do certain things or I wouldn't be happy. And I think he's just sort of accepted that as what comes with the territory [being married to her].*

She did, on the other hand, talk about the workload she faced at home. Dr. Jackson works at home and the office. Her work at home is gender-related and role-related. Women in the home have a role as mother and wife -- a gender-specific role. She is "on duty" at home and at work. While this analysis is not meant to cast a negative light on Dr. Jackson's husband, her comment about juggling caused me to understand that doing all that she does is not easy, and a portion of what she does is done because of gender-related expectations at home.

In one sense, what women "give up" to be in the role of superintendent is the comfort of society's approved roles. "Letting go" of this form of comfort or socialization is one way they remove barriers that have the potential to block their success as superintendents.

In the original study, many of the women had been through divorces because they were forced -- most often by their husbands -- to choose between their lifetime desires to have substantial careers and their desires to have a traditional marriages. Many of the women

superintendents in my studies who had faced this difficult decision "let go" of their marriages to become superintendents. On the other hand, I will never know how many women "let go" of their dreams of becoming superintendents and chose to stay in marriages that blocked their career goals.

Ultimately, I came to understand that the core of this strategy is to "remove or let go of" anything that blocks success -- even at great emotional cost -- in order to meet role-related expectations. This is one time when gender-related expectations took a back seat.

Researcher/Practitioner Dialogue In terms of intimate relationships, Dr. Jackson agreed that women face gender-specific expectations in marriage relationships that make a career choice to be a superintendent even more difficult. She understood how other women found themselves divorced in order to remain superintendents.

Strategy 6: Remain fearless, courageous, a risk-taker, a "can do" person and, at the same time, have a plan for retreat when faced with the impossible.

The notion that anyone in the superintendency must be fearless, courageous, a risk-taker, a "can do" person, is no surprise to anyone familiar with the role-related expectations of the position, but most often these descriptions have been reserved for men in our culture. Almost all of the women in the original study referred to their risk-taking attitudes, noting that most often they were influenced by important people in their lives to be courageous.

Dr. Jackson certainly presented evidence that she was a "risk-taker." Her risk-taking behavior usually related to decisions she made that impacted the students in her district. At one point she told a story that revealed the extent of her willingness to take risks.

> *I'm working now with an inner city. My business administrator said, "Debra, you're not really going to go ahead with this project with the inner city district. You know, we know what people are going to think and say." And I am going ahead with it because, truthfully, students of this community really do need to have other insights and other views and learn to live with others and understand differences. But those are the kinds of decisions that limit the tenure of a superintendent in a particular district.*

Dr. Jackson was willing to risk her job to implement a program that she believed served the students of her district.

The women superintendents in the original study reported that strong influences in their lives helped them develop the ability to be risk-takers and "can do" type of people. The strong influences they referred to were fathers, mothers, grandfathers, bosses or mentors. For example, one woman stated:

> I am the oldest of four children and I always have believed in the impact of the father/daughter relationship. My father said you can do or be anything you want, and I mean I set my goals!

Dr. Jackson did not have a story like the one above. In fact, she felt her childhood had contributed to just the opposite self-image for her:

> *I had the complete opposite experience. I was in what was then called a large high school, an accelerated program. And if anything, in that group of 20 kids, I always felt like the bottom of the barrel, as someone who couldn't do. Those kids were absolutely brilliant. I didn't know where I fit in. In fact, I know my parents expected me to have a job when I graduated, and at 16 I was expected to be able to deal with that. But when you graduated in New York State from this accelerated track, you didn't have any skills.*

I pressed Dr. Jackson to recall what created her "can do" attitude, her willingness to take risks if her background did not create it. She replied:

> *I think of it as more of a personality trait than something that I've picked up along the way. I still don't like being told that I can't do something. . . . Some of it was just a reaction to circumstances.*

I came to understand that Dr. Jackson felt she learned to be independent because of the circumstances of her childhood. She didn't like anyone to tell her that she couldn't do something. Her independent and determined nature created her willingness to take risks, to believe that she could do whatever she wanted even when other people told her she couldn't. Dr. Jackson was

influenced by circumstances rather than particular people. I learned that she was a product of adversity rather than a product of support.

Clearly, Dr. Jackson was a risk-taker, someone able to face adversity and impossible odds. The women in the original study were also able to face adversity and impossible odds, one of which was the fact that they were women. Being a woman was "always an issue." As one woman from the original study stated:

> You're not a male. That's never going to happen. You're always going to be a female in that group. It's never not [original emphasis]an issue. You're always a female in a group of males and you're never neuter -- that just doesn't happen either.

At times, this fact created frustration and added more difficulty to their already challenging lives. Planning ways to retreat and regain strength, then, was critical for women in the position. Hill and Ragland's (1995) research on women in educational leadership positions showed that these individuals take time for stress-relieving activities. The women in the original study planned ways to retreat into the cracks and crevices of their busy lives because they recognized that their own private selves must remain extremely private. When sharing this part of their practice, the women appeared to be slightly uncomfortable. It was my sense that this aspect of their lives was almost too private to share. They were so accustomed to measuring their worth by their task-oriented behavior that they seemed reluctant to admit that life held more than focused work. Once they began sharing the information, however, it was clear that this private space was extremely necessary for their own well-being, and, in fact, for their continued excellent performance in their positions.

Dr. Jackson also talked about the way she found time for herself -- and the necessity of that private time. She talked about three different types of "retreat time." First she talked about private time with her family.

> *There's the time for getting away with your family. Part of that kind of time is to make sure everybody is away from things they normally do so that we really have some time together.*

Next, she talked about the type of private, reflective time she needs to "come back stronger" on the job.

> *The district just sent me to Harvard for two weeks, and that was really time to reflect and think. There's a need for finding time to really think about what we do and reflect about it, write about it [undirected, on your own time]. There's a need to spend time reading what's current, thinking about what's current and almost getting my whole belief system and value system sort of regenerated.*

Finally, she talked about the type of " solo retreat time" that she needed to stay physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy.

> *I absolutely need a physical type of down time. I think it's truly just knowing that we come back stronger. We think clearer when we take care of our bodies as well as our minds. And for me it has to be a solo activity for it to work.*

As I said, this strategy has two parts. My cross data analysis of the women in the original study led me to conclude that when the two parts work together, women in the superintendency are successful.

Researcher/Practitioner Dialogue While Dr. Jackson had no mentor, she felt strongly that she was a risk-taker. She affirmed that although the cause of risk-taking behavior is not always the same, the behavior is very important for all superintendents. She also believed that for women to be superintendents at all was a risk and required courage. And as indicated, she spoke strongly about the need for retreats of all types.

Strategy 7: Share power: share credit.

This strategy reflects how the women in the original study specifically defined and used power (see Brunner, Chapter 4, in this book for a fuller discussion of power theory). In order to understand how they viewed power, I turned to some of the literature on the subject. Nancy Hartsock (1987) began her discussion of power by associating it with gender. She asserted that power defined by white male intellectuals is dominance, strength, force, authority, and violence.

Cantor and Bernay (1992) concluded that unconscious practices and social norms support the perception that power is masculine. This is a standard line of thought.

The women in my original study, however, did not practice or define power as dominance, authority, or power over others. Instead, they used a collaborative, inclusive consensus-building model of power. They worked in concert with others rather than in authority or dominance over others. This collaborative action was comfortable for them because they did not view themselves as powerful in the traditional sense. In turn, this non-traditional view and use of power was a strategy for success because it met gender-related expectations -- that women are not to be dominant or in charge -- while at the same time meeting role-related expectations -- they got the job done.

Several of the women had difficulty talking about power because their views of power were so different from the dominant definition. One woman flatly stated, "Actually I never think of the superintendency in the sense of power. . . ." I believe the following statement regarding power reveals a transformed sense of the word, and was representative of the women in the original study:

> In a position of power you really are in a position of servant leadership. Your leadership should be to help other people accomplish goals and objectives in the mission, in the vision of an organization or a school system, or whatever. I mean that's really what it is to me. Power means assisting other people to accomplish their goals, and that means a lot of collaboration and linking and linkage and bringing people to together. That's what power means to me.

This compares with the definition shared by Dr. Jackson who defined power as follows:

> *I define power as the ability to empower others. . . . Power for me is getting others to understand that they can really make a difference, and working that through so that there's a sharing of what we do.*

Dr. Jackson defined power as shared, as people working together to accomplish things. She believed that part of her work was to help others understand how important they were in

accomplishing what everyone wants to get done. I asked Dr. Jackson to go further with her discussion of power and to tell me how she worked with others.

> *I also am very willing to hear what other people have to say. So my decisions are usually based on what's best for students and from the perspective of listening to others and gathering as much information about other's standpoints as I possibly can.*

In the statement above, Dr. Jackson identified her view of collaboration -- working with others. When I mentioned to Dr. Jackson that I heard her talking about collaboration, she wanted to make clear her specific use of the term. She began with the comment:

> *I start having discussions in many different ways to talk to people who might see things very differently than I. And then from that I, well, more than likely build in a process. It's probably not in my nature to build any process, but I do. And sort of get some "buy in" along the way from someone that usually has a direction when I'm moving forth. But I'm also someone who has -- from meeting with people and hearing other pieces -- changed in some ways, I try to learn as much as I can in that process.*

Dr. Jackson was working to let me know that how I defined collaboration was important to her. She viewed herself as collaborative, but didn't want me to get the idea that she delegated decisions to committees or wasn't involved in the process herself. As she put it:

> *I'm definitely collaborative. What I was trying to communicate is that there's a difference between being a collaborative leader -- I am definitely not an authoritarian leader. No one would say that about me. But on the other hand, I don't abdicate the decision process. I don't just say here is this group and whatever you come up with is fine. I really see it as my role to give every bit of information to a collaborative group. And if it means we all have that information among us that's fine, but if we don't, it means getting out there and getting that information to that group. But to me there's a leadership piece there. I see it as a responsibility. Now if someone else in that group can do that, that's fine. But probably just my involvement is important.*

At that point in the interview, I began to understand that Dr. Jackson didn't want me to view her as someone who turned decisions over to group. I responded, "Maybe this will be helpful, maybe it won't be. But the difference I see between collaboration and what you're talking about -- just turning the decision over to a group -- that to me is delegation." Dr. Jackson replied, "Yes, okay. And that's not what I do at all." She said that although there were times when she was a delegator, she was not a delegator when it came to collaborative decision-making. She continued by stating her agreement with my assessment that delegation to committee was not collaboration. She said:

> *That's probably the difference, yes. I think I need to be an active contributor to a group. So collaboration for me is to bring what I have to bring and help other people bring what they have to bring.*

At that point I asked her if others viewed her as a collaborative leader. She replied:

> *Oh yes. If you ask people -- I can say that very distinctly because we just had a visitor here and that's exactly how I was described. I was described as someone who looks at bringing together others ideas and pulling together a direction and helping people implement what it is they're trying to do.*

This notion of collaboration parallels the definition of power as shared. Dr. Jackson did not delegate her individually held power to a group so that they could make a decision. She viewed the people in the group as powerful in their own right. But she was an active part of the group and the collaborative process. She shared power with those in the group, and those in the group shared power with her. They made decisions together. This distinction in the definition of collaboration is important. Dr. Jackson was not powerless, but she did not hold all of the power -- evidence that Dr. Jackson's definition of power is a part of her practice.

In all of the narratives in the original study, the women separated themselves from the definition of power as control, authority or dominance over others. I came to understand that perceiving the self as separate from the dominant culture's notion of power as "power over" seemed to be necessary for a woman to be truly collaborative, and thus successful. Genuine

collaboration occurs when all participants are considered equals. This attitude and practice was reflected in all the narratives of the women superintendents.

Researcher/Practitioner Dialogue Dr. Jackson believed that this strategy was accurate and important. She reflected on a dilemma she faced with a board of education member who sometimes thinks that she is too strong in her leadership style and too weak at other times. She didn't alter my interpretations in any way. Her discussion of collaboration added to my understanding of the nuances related to its definition.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the usefulness of a framework of collective solutions for women superintendents -- strategies for success. This examination was important because it not only altered the framework, but also added additional understanding to the original interpretations. After the "back talk" from Dr. Jackson, the strategies were altered to read as follows (changes are in italics):

1. Women superintendents need to learn to balance role-related expectations with gender related ones. *There are numerous approaches to balancing these two.*
2. Women superintendents need to keep their agendas simple in order to focus on their primary purpose: the care of children, including strict attention to their academic achievement. (no change)
3. *Women superintendents need to develop the ability to remain "feminine" in the ways they communicate and at the same time be heard in a masculinized culture.*
4. *Women superintendents need to disregard the old myth that they must "act like a man" while in a male role. It doesn't work.*
5. Women superintendents need to remove or let go of anything that blocks their success. (no change)

6. Women superintendents need to remain fearless, courageous, risk-takers, "can do" people. At the same time, they need to have a plan for retreat when faced with the impossible. (no change)

7. Women superintendents need to share power and credit. (no change)

In conclusion, these altered strategies could begin the construction of collective solutions. Sadly, some of the strategies may reify current gender bias (See #1, 3, 5). These strategies tend to insist that women continue to behave in the limited ways dictated by the dominant masculine culture. Other strategies, however, are promising transformations of the role of superintendent. All, at a practical level, appear to be important for women who are succeeding as superintendents. Similar findings are in the literature on women in educational administration (see Adler, Laney, and Packer 1993; Edson 1988; Schmuck 1975; and Shakeshaft 1989) but the findings in this case have been reexamined by someone in the field for their potential usefulness as collective solutions to the gendered problems facing women in the position.

Contrary to common sense, the positional power of the superintendent does not eliminate the need for gendered strategies for successful women in the position. This fact makes collective solutions for women especially important as the negative effects of gender bias appear to be greater rather than lesser for women who occupy the most powerful administrative office in public schools.

Notes:

1. Small portions of the text in this section are taken verbatim from an earlier manuscript -- the write-up of the original study -- Brunner, C. C. (1997). Women superintendents: Strategies for success. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of School Administrators, Orlando.

2. Some feminists have been critical of the views of women and caring held by Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984, 1991). These feminists are critical of any essentialized notion of women (Weiler 1988; cited in Ladson-Billings 1995) and suggest that no empirical

evidence exists to support the notion that women care in ways different from men or that any such caring informs their scholarship and work (Ladson-Billings 1995, 473).

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