

Influencing Others: Women Superintendents and Power

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Abstract:

The position of public school superintendency in the U.S. is the most powerful position in schools. Yet research has shown that women who hold the position have difficulty talking about power (Brunner, 2000). A survey designed to measure perceptions of power was sent to 210 women school superintendents in four Midwestern states during the 2000-2001 school year. Results of data analysis revealed that there were significant differences in the women's age and years of experience in the superintendency and how they perceived their uses of power. Interviews were conducted with nine of the women in the study and revealed that they believed their power increased when they shared or gave power away. Consistent with previous research, this study also found that women were hesitant and reluctant to speak about their power in their role as superintendents.

Latest figures show that in 2002, women comprised about 13% of the nation's school superintendents (Brunner, Grogan & Prince, 2003). Yet the research is showing that more women are in the "pipeline" for the position. We know that in school districts women have surpassed men in the elementary principalship (but not secondary) and that more women hold central office positions (Hodginson & Montenegro, 1999). Women equal or surpass men in numbers in graduate educational leadership programs (Logan, 1998). If women comprise 70% of all teaching staff in schools (Bell & Chase, 1993), and the position of teacher is the start of the traditional pathway leading to a superintendency (Glass, 1992), why don't we see more women in the position? This key question has been framing research agendas for only a short time. Research on women in the superintendency has only been conducted in the last 20 years (Brunner, 1999). Researchers who are currently looking at women in the role are calling for more studies

(Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000). Once we have a significant body of work investigating how women are faring in the role as superintendent, we can help to dispel the idea that if women aren't in the position in large numbers, they must not be able to do the job.

Brunner says that for a woman to be hired as a school superintendent, especially in a large urban district, is extremely difficult. "To step into a role that is so heavily masculinized is a real challenge; to make it into a superintendency at all a woman has to be very, very good," she says (Rader, 2001). I wanted to find out more about these "very, very good" women. What do these women have to say about leading school districts? Do they feel powerful in the most powerful position in public schools? How do women superintendents perceive their uses of power? To answer these and other questions, I designed a study to investigate how women superintendents described their work lives through their perceptions of their leadership practices and uses of power in their positions. The study was conducted in the Midwest during the academic year 2000-2001 and was both quantitative and qualitative in method. A survey was sent to 210 women school superintendents in four Midwestern states and interviews were conducted with nine women among the four states. The survey contained three distinct items: the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (Kouzes & Posner, 1997), Your Sources of Influence (Rosener, 1990), and a questionnaire seeking to determine personal and professional demographic information. This article reports on the phase of the study investigating how the women perceived their uses of power, and how they defined and generally talked about power. For a detailed description of the women and a report of the phase of the study regarding their perceptions of leadership practices, see Katz (2004).

Conceptual Framework – Power as Influence

The conceptual framework for the phase of the study investigating women superintendents' uses of power is based on a model of influence. This model is based on the supposition that it is the leader's use of influence in mobilizing people within the organization to go beyond their individual interests in working toward the common good. There are different types of sources of influence that the leader draws upon to influence her followers. A common typology of influence (as sources of power) and one that has been used often in research is that developed by two social psychologists, J.R. French and B.H. Raven. The French and Raven taxonomy is based on the concept that power refers to the ability or potential of an agent to influence a target. One of the advantages of the French and Raven model of power is that it acknowledges that power can be based on the desire to maintain relationships and not just on the possession of status or resources (Carli, 1999).

In a discussion of power, French and Raven stated “we shall define power in terms of influence, and influence in terms of psychological change [in the target person(s)] . . . which includes changes in behavior, opinions, attitudes, goals, needs, values, and all other aspects of the person's psychological field” (French & Raven cited in Nesler, et al., 1999, p. 751). French and Raven identified five bases or sources of power – reward, coercive, expert, legitimate, and referent. The five power bases can be divided among three types of power – position, mixed, and personal. The chart below developed by Boje (2004) shows this division and defines the power bases.

Position Power Types

- **Legitimate Power** - based on the follower's perception that a source has the right to influence followers and that the followers ought to comply. The leader must stress the legitimacy of her position and set role expectations.
- **Reward Power** - The ability to control resources and rewards. "The higher a person's position in the authority hierarchy of the organization, the more control over scarce resources the person is likely to have" (Yukl, 1989, p. 17).

Mixed Type

- **Referent power** - the desire of others to please a person toward whom they feel strong affection (French & Raven cited in Yukl, 1989). The referent power of a leader over subordinates depends upon feelings of friendship and loyalty developed over time. The referent power of a leader is increased by the leader's acting friendly and considerate, showing concern for the needs and feelings of others, demonstrating trust and respect, and treating people fairly (Yukl, 1989).

Personal Power Types

- **Expert Power** - a major source of personal power in organizations is used in solving and performing important tasks (Yukl, 1989). The leader possesses special expertise that is in short supply and high demand but is only a source of power if others are dependent on the person for the advice or assistance they need.
- **Coercive Power**- Power derived from control over punishments and the capacity to prevent someone from obtaining desired rewards.

The sources of power are not mutually exclusive; it is assumed that leaders use them all, but that they prefer some sources to others (French and Raven as cited in Rosener, 1990b). Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) believe that leaders combine their sources of power and offer three hypotheses to do so: (1) sources of power are additive, in that each new source can add to a person's accumulated power; (2) sources of power are compensatory, the lack of one source may be compensated by the presence of another; and (3) sources of power can gain or lose value over time, so a person's accumulated power can change even though his or her sources of power remain constant.

Study Design

Research Questions

The questions that framed the phase of the study investigating power were:

1. How do women define power?
2. How do women perceive their uses of power?
3. How do women generally talk about power?

Quantitative method

Surveys were sent to all practicing women superintendents (N=210) on state lists in Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin during the summer of 2000. Fourteen women had left their positions which reduced the population for the study to 196 women. Rate of return of the surveys was 76%. Dillman's (1999) tailored design method for mail surveys was implemented to maximize the survey return rate. Dillman recommends that researchers make several contacts to participants in a study to increase survey rate of return. After sending an introductory letter with the survey, the second contact consisted of a postcard mailed two weeks after the initial mailing. The third contact was sent to nonrespondents in the form of a brief letter that reiterated the purpose of the study and stressed the importance of a high return rate for research purposes. This mailing also included another survey and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The fourth contact included a letter that briefly mentioned receiving responses from the returned surveys, stressed the possible implications of the research, reiterated the confidential nature of the project, and included a survey and return envelope. The fifth and final contact was a telephone call to all nonrespondents when I asked if they had questions about the study and urged them to complete and return the survey.

The survey consisted of the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI-self) developed by Kouzes and Posner (1997), Your Sources of Influence (Rosener, 1990a) which was the measure of power, and a survey of demographics. Your Sources of Influence assessed the degree to which each of thirty-one items was a source of the women's ability to influence others. For example, to name a few items from the measure, using a Likert scale of 1 (disagree) to 5 (agree) women would rate how they would influence others by their expertise, their personality, their work record, their charisma.

In 1990, Judy Rosener was interested in researching the relationship of power and gender. She was studying women in organizations (members from the International Women's Forum) and how they might perceive their uses of power but had not found an acceptable instrument to measure power bases. She created her instrument, Your Sources of Influence to measure alternative power bases derived from a typology articulated by French and Raven (cited in Rosener, 1990a). Rosener believed her measure has the following characteristics: (1) it measures how a subject perceives her/his power to influence others in general, not in relationship to one specific individual (most measures are dyad specific); (2) it is simple and direct; (3) it is psychometrically sound; and (4) it assumes the ability of respondents to self-report power sources accurately (Rosener, 1990). The questions were designed to tap the extent to which an individual saw herself as having each of the following five sources of power: **legitimate power** – having a position or title that carries with it authority; **expert power** – possessing special expertise that is in short supply and high demand; **reward power** – the ability to reward and punish; **referent power** – having charisma or some personal attribute that others wish to emulate; and **coercive power** – the ability to coerce. In Rosener's study referent power

was divided into two distinct power bases: referent power I, concerning a person's use of status to influence others and referent power II, a measure of a person's approachability or personality to influence others. In my study as in Rosener's, referent power was also divided into the two power bases of referent power I and referent power II.

Reliability coefficients obtained for the power measure ranged from .56 and .80. Any subscale with a reliability coefficient of below .65 was considered unreliable (as having too low a reliability measure) and was not used for further analysis. Reward power with a reliability coefficient of .56 fit this criterion and was not used in data analysis.

Qualitative method

Avolio, Bass, and Jung (1999) state that "there has been very little effort to confirm survey evaluations of leaders with alternative methodologies such as observation and/or interviews" (p. 459). Therefore, to fill this gap a qualitative method was used to explore the interpretation women superintendents gave to their uses of power. In-depth interviews were conducted with a small sample of the women superintendents who participated in the survey. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of the women superintendents' responses on the power measure and to allow the women to define and talk about power and describe their sources of influence within their school context.

Interviews used an interactive-relational approach as described by Chirban (1996). This interview technique was chosen because it purposively creates a relationship between the interviewer and the participants through the particular relationship that the interviewer establishes. This approach to interviewing supposes that a successful

interview is more likely to happen when collaboration, personal attributes, values, and feelings are brought and made available by both participants and promises to deliver a clearer, deeper portrait of the person being interviewed. To illustrate, at the beginning of each interview I took time to talk about my background and varied experiences as a practitioner and then as an administrator in education, why I chose to study women school superintendents, and what I hoped to accomplish through the research. I followed an interview guide that I had developed which listed the questions. I gave the guide to the women I interviewed before the interview began so they had a chance to look over the questions before answering them. At times I deviated from the guide during the interview, when I commented and asked questions in response to what I was hearing.

Data Analysis

Quantitative

According to data analysis from the responses on the power measure, the women superintendents preferred to be influencing others (using power) in the following order: referent power II, expert power, coercive power, referent power I, and legitimate power. As stated earlier, due to a low reliability coefficient, reward power was not used for analysis.

To answer the research question asking how the women perceived their uses of power, analyses of variance (one-way ANOVAs) were conducted to determine if there were differences in the perceptions of women superintendents regarding their uses of power based on age, years of administrative experience, and size and structure of their districts. Data analyses revealed that there were differences in age and years of

experience regarding perceived uses of power. There were no other significant differences.

There was a statistically significant difference in age and perceived uses of power. In an attempt to divide the groups for age into fairly equal numbers, there were four groups of categories for age: 38 – 49, 50 – 52, 53 – 54, and 55 – 56. Women superintendents in the youngest age group (38 – 49) perceived themselves to be using referent power II (approachability) as a source of influence (power) more than women in the other groups for age. Referent power II is defined as a person's approachability or personality that is used to influence others. The four items on the power measure that relate to referent power II are: interpersonal skills, personality, communication skills, and charisma. Referent power from the follower's standpoint is based on the follower's identification with the leader or the desire to be associated with the leader. As described earlier, referent power also depends on the desire of others to please a person toward whom they feel strong affection. The referent power of a leader over subordinates depends upon feelings of friendship and loyalty developed over time. Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) believe that referent power is informal power based on expertise, attractiveness, and charisma. It involves influence through "rational persuasion, faith, and personal identification" (p. 52).

Referent power is highly personal and based on a feeling of identification with others. Individuals who use referent power do not have to have external advantages over others, although they might. "As a result, according to the model, even those who lack access to other forms of power can employ referent power" (p. 83). Johnson (cited in Carli, 1999) extended French and Raven's model to gender and stated that because

referent power involves maintaining good relationships, it is more congruent with gender role expectations for women than for men. Referent power would be one source of power generally available to women and therefore easily accessed. Tables 1 and 2 present the results of the statistical analysis of power and age.

Table 1. Power and Age

Power Bases	<u>df</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>P</u>
Legitimate power	3, 143	.51	.68
Expert power	3, 143	.76	.52
Referent power I	3, 143	.48	.70
Referent power II	3, 143	2.68	.05*
Coercive power	3, 143	.57	.64

* $p \leq .05$.

Note: Shaded areas denote significance for Referent power II and Age

Table 2. Age and Referent Power II

Age Groups	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>N</u>
38-49	17.50	1.72	38
50-52	16.61	2.17	36
53-54	16.26	3.13	35
55-65	16.08	2.31	38

Note: Shaded areas denote significant mean for youngest age group and Referent Power II

There was a statistically significant difference in years of administrative experience (experience as a superintendent) and perceived use of power. In the attempt to divide years of experience into fairly equal numbers, there were four groups for years of experience: 0 – 2, 3 – 5, 6 – 9, and 10 – 20 years of experience. Women superintendents who had from three to five years of experience as a superintendent

perceived themselves to be using expert power as a source of influence more than women in the other groups for years of experience. As described earlier, expert power is a major source of personal power in organizations as the leader possesses special expertise that is in short supply and high demand. From these findings, it seems as if the women superintendents, once in their positions for 3 years, felt that they had enough experience in the role and therefore perceived themselves able to influence others with their special expertise through expert power. Yukl (1989) explained that expert power is most commonly applied in the form of reasonable persuasion. The leader presents logical arguments and supporting evidence for a plan or request. Success depends on the leader's knowledge and ability in addition to persuasive communication skills and credibility.

There are different sources of power in an organization. Personal power depends on the attributes of the interpersonal relationship between the agent and target person and "includes relative task expertise, friendship and loyalty, and a leader's charismatic qualities" (Yukl, 1989, p. 15). Referent and expert power are related to personal power. Research on the use of different forms of power by leaders suggests that effective leaders rely more on personal power than on positional power (Yukl, 1989).

In his book on leadership in organizations, Yukl (1989) devoted a chapter to power, influence tactics, and leader effectiveness. Podsakoff and Schriesheim (cited in Yukl, 1989) reviewed 25 years of field research using the French and Raven power taxonomy. Studies regarding leader power over subordinates found that expert and referent power positively correlated with subordinate satisfaction and performance in a majority of the studies. "The results suggest that effective leaders rely more than ineffective leaders on expert and referent power to influence subordinates" (Yukl, 1989,

p. 35). Tables 3 and 4 present the results of the statistical analysis of power and years of experience.

Table 3. Power and Years of Experience

<i>Power Bases</i>	<u>df</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
Legitimate power	3, 143	.63	.60
Expert power	3, 143	3.51	.02*
Referent power I	3, 143	1.82	.15
Referent power II	3, 143	1.18	.32
Coercive power	3, 143	.35	.80

* $p \leq .05$.

Note: Shaded areas denote significance for expert power and years of experience

Table 4. Years of Administrative Experience and Expert Power

Yrs. of Experience	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>N</u>
0 - 2	12.61	1.80	31
3 - 5	14.00	1.25	43
6 - 9	13.38	2.28	42
10-20	13.74	2.10	31

Note: Shaded areas denote significant mean for years of experience of 3-5 years and power

Although this article discusses the phase of the study investigating power, one interesting finding of the overall larger study should be noted here. As stated earlier, besides the power measure the survey included a measure of leadership practices, the LPI or Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (Kouzes & Posner, 1997). I was interested to discover if any of the power bases correlated with any of the leadership practices. The LPI measures how a person perceives herself to be using five leadership practices: Challenging the Process, Inspiring a Shared Vision, Enabling Others to Act, Modeling

the Way, and Encouraging the Heart. A correlation matrix revealed that Referent power II correlated with four of the five practices, all but Challenging the Process. Women in this study perceived themselves to be using Referent power II more than the other power bases to influence others. This finding is interesting and significant given the discussion above about referent power and the correlation of this type of power to four leadership practices. If referent power is more available to women, based on their approachability and desire to build trust over time, women might be better able to lead when they employ referent power. The matrix also revealed that expert power correlated with the leadership practice, Modeling the Way. Again, this is another interesting finding that relates to the significance of expert power and years of experience found in this study. Women who use their expert power most likely prefer to model the way for others. The two key leadership behaviors that Kouzes and Posner (1995) defined for the leadership practice of Modeling the Way are setting the example through behavior consistent with belief in shared values and through the planning of small wins that promote consistent progress and build commitment.

Table 5 displays the results of the correlation statistics for the leadership practices in the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self and the power bases in the power measure, Your Sources of Influence.

Table 5. Correlation of LPI-Self and Power Measure

Power Bases	Leadership Practices					LPI Total
	Challenging the Process	Inspiring a Shared Vision	Enabling Others to Act	Modeling the Way	Encouraging the Heart	
Legitimate	-.04	-.01	-.01	.00	-.01	-.02
Expert	.14	.12	.10	.21**	.10	.16*
Referent I	-.07	.02	-.04	.02	.02	-.01
Referent II	.09	.22**	.19**	.23**	.22**	.23**
Coercive	-.09	.05	-.09	.02	-.03	-.06
Total power	-.01	.06	.01	.10	.08	.06

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Note: Shaded areas show statistical significance

Qualitative

To add to the quantitative results and to give the women a chance to talk about how they defined and described their power, interviews were conducted with nine women. Interviews were conducted in the offices of six of the participants. Three of the participants preferred to meet in another location other than their office where they felt they would not be interrupted. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were read several times. Patterns or themes in the data began to emerge after reading the transcripts. The three qualitative research questions were color-coded. Large segments of text corresponding to the three qualitative research questions were color-coded to correspond to the research questions and then reduced to short phrases. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend using a conceptual matrix to begin to visualize the data. Wolcott (1994) said that a display of findings was one way to analyze qualitative data. "For the findings-oriented researcher, graphic

presentation offers an alternative to prose not only for conveying information but for dramatizing or emphasizing particular aspects of the study” (p. 31). The conceptual matrix consisted of a grid which had the research questions placed across the top of the grid and the names of the women superintendents placed down the left side of the grid. The color-coded phrases were placed under each research question corresponding to the superintendent who had used the phrases. The short phrases were then highlighted and further reduced into one to two word chunks. The chunks were then developed into themes. Additionally, a software computer program, QSR N5 was utilized to retrieve and analyze data. Each participant’s transcript was searched using key words to correspond to the word chunks to further analyze the data so that all instances of the chunked words or phrases occurring in the data would not be missed.

Interview participants

Nine women were interviewed among the four states – two from each state and I added a third from one state. The reason for the third interview participant from one of the states had to do with the fact that Vivian was the oldest participant interviewed and had been with her school district 30 years, 20 of those years as the superintendent. I believed that since she presented as an “outlier” due to her age and longer years of experience as a superintendent compared to the other superintendents studied, her views on power might provide a very interesting and different perspective. Patton (1990) describes this type of sampling as “extreme or deviant case sampling” (p. 169). This approach “focuses on cases that are rich in information because they are unusual or special in some way” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). All of the names have been changed to address confidentiality issues.

Two of the women were superintendents of large school districts ranging in student population from 19,500 to 23,000; two were from mid-size districts ranging in student population from 5,600 to 6,700; and five were superintendents of small school districts ranging in student population from 100 students to 2,100 students. The following paragraphs briefly profile the women in categories of district size.

This section profiles women in small districts. Laura, 49, the superintendent of a small, rural district consisting of one building housing grades K-8 with 98 students has a Ph.D., taught 11 years before working in administration, and has held four administrative positions before becoming a superintendent. Ruth, 42, led a small school district of 400 students, has a Ph.D. and taught school for 6 years prior to accepting her first administrative position as superintendent at age 30, the position that she held at the time of the interview. Vivian, 62, led a district consisting of one building housing 700 students in grades K-8, has a master's degree and has been the superintendent for 20 years. Before attaining her superintendency, Vivian taught, was a principal, curriculum director, and administrative assistant all in her present district. Joan, 57, led a district that had two schools serving students in grades K-6 and 7-12. Student population was approximately 964 students. She has a Ph.D. and taught for six years before serving in principal positions in four different buildings. Marilyn, 48, led a district with two buildings housing approximately 2100 students. She has a Ph.D. and taught for six years before serving as a principal in four buildings.

In mid-size districts were two superintendents, Maxine and Barb. Maxine who described her educational career as ABD (all but dissertation), at 53 had been in her present position for 6 years. The student population in her district consisted of 5600

students in grades K-12 in 13 school buildings. Barb, 49 with a Ph.D. led a district that had 6700 students in grades K-12 housed in 16 school buildings with 22 administrators.

Martha and Geri led large school districts. Martha who has her Ph.D. ran a school district that had a student population of approximately 19,500 students in grades K-12 housed in 45 buildings with 59 building administrators. She began her present position, her first superintendency, at age 43 and had been in the position for 3 years. Geri, 54, led a district with 47 building administrators in 28 buildings housing 23,000 students in grades K-12. She holds a Ph.D. and taught 5 years before entering into school administration where she held several positions of principal, curriculum director, and assistant superintendent before obtaining a superintendency at age 41.

Defining (or not), describing, and talking about power

This section reveals how some of the women were sometimes reluctant or even unable to define power. Other discussion in this section shows how some women were able to define their power and even go beyond a definition. Also in this section, women talk about building connections with others by sharing power and in one instance by “giving power away.”

When Geri was asked to define power, she hesitated: “Power to me is – hmm, definition of power?” I said, “To help you formulate that definition, the other question is: How do you influence people to get them to work to the best of their ability? Then Geri began to talk about her ideas about sharing power:

I think that power is shared. You gain power by having the trust and confidence of the people with whom you work. That what they are about is very legitimate and it would be treated as legitimate and that in this case I would allow them to do their jobs and there is a certain amount of power that comes with titles. But the actual power of being able to make transformations to make systemic change to move a school district forward really is only the ability to get others to subscribe

to your vision to where you want to go and to use their abilities and resources to help you do that. So power to me is very shared. It doesn't sit in this office.

Geri alluded to the fact that she uses her legitimacy in the position as a source of influence but also legitimizes others in their positions. As described earlier, legitimate power refers to the fact that the leader has the right to influence followers and must stress the legitimacy of her position and set role expectations. Geri's highest score on the power measure showed that she perceived herself to be using expert power to influence others. But Geri's description about how she influences others clearly shows her use of referent power by building trust and confidence in people and treating them fairly by allowing them the freedom to do their jobs.

Martha's score on the power measure revealed that she perceived herself to use referent power II to influence others and her talk about power corresponded to her score on the power measure. Martha defined power as the ability to help people realize their potential and capability in the organization. When I asked Martha how she helped people do that, she said she modeled the behavior "that I would expect them to portray." Martha told me that she was quite a task master and she was intent on "focusing on the target goals and objectives." But she also was intent on "showing people that I'm human." And those are generally the ways that I influence people." Martha came back to the issue of power late in the interview. The last question I asked intended to give women a chance to add something to the interview. The question was: "Is there anything you would add or ask if conducting this interview?" Obviously Martha was thinking about her definition of power and wanted to add more of her thoughts and ideas about power. She said:

I guess the only thing that I would add would be in the relationship to the word power. I think that power is often viewed as a negative term by people and they use it negatively but I don't see it as a negative term and I think it's a very

positive term and I believe the strength of any leader is not to have power over people but to have power with people. And when you have power with people then you are able to accomplish your goals in a much more effective and rewarding way.

Without being prompted in any way about the concept of “power with” and “power over,” Martha used the terms that Brunner (1999) found women using in her study. Brunner found that definitions of power from the superintendents in her study of male and female superintendents fell into the two categories of power over and power with/to. In most cases, those superintendents who defined power as “power with/to” were very collaborative in their decision-making style. As discussed in the section describing the quantitative data analysis, this study found significant differences in preferred use of the two bases of power, referent power and expert power. Those are two sources of personal power, similar to the category of power with/to, as opposed to positional power which is similar to power over. Thus we see Martha thinking about her power when the questions are asked and wanting to clarify that power can be very positive if shared with others.

On the power measure, Maxine perceived herself to be influencing others through expert power. When I asked Maxine what her definition of power was, she surprised me with a question. She asked: “Are you familiar with referent power?” I was surprised at this since referent power was a significant power base in the statistical analysis of differences in age and power. Referent power also correlated with four of the five leadership practices. Maxine went on to talk about her use of referent power.

I think for me that part of my ability to move a system forward is based on the relationships I build. It’s based on the sense of mission and vision. It’s based on my passion. It’s based on my desire to nurture and to provide growth opportunities. I find that I can impact change the most significantly by getting

people to believe. . . There have been some folks who have said to me, aren't you afraid to fail. And my response to them was, no what I often fear is not trying. I'm never afraid of failing. What I measure as failure is not trying. So I think that whole notion of holding hope up there and enlisting people to walk with you; you have to be knowledgeable. There can't be an empty promise. But if you can bring the data in as you are creating the vision, you take people with you. In the last 5 years we have reduced over 5 ½ million dollars out of our budget. We had no community outcry. And we will at some point down the line. But much of it is creating sense of community.

I asked Maxine how she was familiar with referent power. She said that her assistant superintendent had a background in counseling and after observing Maxine's ways of leading, felt that she used referent power to influence others. Here is how Maxine described her conversations with her assistant superintendent:

She and I on occasion talk together about how to impact change. And we talk some of referent power. She would have a much deeper knowledge of it than I would. Mine is much more peripheral in nature. But in terms of my practice, and she'll say to me, that's how you get so much done because that's what you use. I think it's just part of who I am and who I've always been. For some reason, most of my life I've been able to influence people. My husband jokes. We've been married now 33 years so he now gets it. But he said he used to just follow me the wrong way because he said you were just so sure you were right. He said now I don't follow you to the elevator anymore because guess what, sometimes you are wrong!

The power measure revealed that Barb perceived herself to be using expert power and legitimate power equally to influence others. Barb was the only person of those interviewed who had two bases she perceived herself using equally. Barb's ideas of power were around the theme of shared power and how her power increases when she "gives it away." Barb answered quickly when I asked about her definition of power and in her talk the themes of expert and legitimate power are evident.

I think power is the ability to get a job done. And I think that you only have power when you give it away. And I mean that by there is no job in this organization that I can do by myself. And I have lots of power when I go out and

say to my colleagues, my directors, and my assistant superintendent, “What do you think we should do about this?” My power increases ten times by doing that because right there I’ve tapped that wealth of influence and information and we are all more powerful because of that and I think that to me a lot of people say knowledge is power. I guess knowledge is power if you hoard it. You know to me it is more powerful when you say to people this is our situation, here are all the rules and within these rules how do we solve this problem? And that gives us all power over it and power by the sense of control. I want people in those buildings to feel powerful. I want them to feel like they are making the difference. In our organization the teachers are the most important employees in the sense that they have direct access to our children. That is the absolutely the most important position in our district. The rest of us are all support. I always visualize the student in the middle with the teachers around and then all the rest of us beyond that because that teacher has direct contact. That teacher can make or break us. One sentence can make or break the entire district. It is so important that those folks feel powerful and in control because those things go together. If you feel powerful you feel in control and if you’re in control you are going to be responsible and because you have the authority to do what you need to do.

Laura’s preferred use of expert power is obvious in her definition of power. She stated that power for her is the idea that it is her job to be there for others, she is the person “who people go to for answers.” She explained further,

It’s being the one that people count on for direction. Its being the one that ultimately has to say I screwed up or we screwed up and we are sorry or we’re standing firm on that. It’s the person that people can talk to.

And interestingly, on the power measure, Laura perceived herself to be using expert power most often. As stated earlier, expert power is used when the leader possesses special expertise that is in short supply and high demand but is only a source of power if others are dependent on the person for the advice or assistance they need. Laura said she believed that she influenced people in two ways. One way is to be very direct with people by stating her idea, and the other way is to compromise. Here’s how she put this idea of influencing others:

I think I influence people in two ways. I’m not afraid to say you need to do this. And that’s the kind of influence that works. Sometimes I just say this is the way I

see it and if so if that's an influence or if that's a directive, either way you get what you want. Most of the time I think I try to exercise the fine art of compromise. I am a believer in balance and connections. And that if people can see why things need to work together and why I'm headed in that direction, that they will go with me. I guess I explain, I strongly suggest, I occasionally prod, I often take the devil's advocate position. And people know I'm in their corner. People know I'll be there for them and they typically will go with me.

Another person who used expert power and discussed it as such was Ruth. She defined power as "enabling or encouraging people to complete a task or complete a job." When asked about how she influenced others, Ruth stated that she believed she was "very good about providing resources and information and coming at it slowly by not voicing my opinion right away, but providing information detailing an issue or a problem and [going] slow and methodical." On the power measure, Ruth perceived herself as influencing others through expert power. As with Laura, Ruth's idea of being the resource for people and providing information is consistent with using expert power.

Vivian hesitated when I asked her what her definition of power might be. She said, "Power, in what sense?" My next question to her (as with the other women who did not have a ready definition of power) asked her to tell me how she went about influencing others. Her ideas about that centered on her use of expert power as she said,

I guess I try to influence people by becoming as well versed on whatever topic it is that I care to present to them and then give them reasons to believe in why I did not believe in it or do believe in it and allow them to make up their own minds. If it's something I truly believe in and want, I try to explain to them why I think it is necessary. If that's power, then that's fine. A lot of people say I have a different kind of power and I'm hoping at least what they mean is that there is respect. And respect in itself does breed power if people listen to you.

When I asked Vivian to talk about that "different kind of power," I asked if she felt it was position power. Vivian said, "I think the position gives you power but I think how you use that depends upon you as a person. I don't look at myself as being a

powerful person in terms of the position. I'm hoping that I'm a powerful person by my background and my knowledge and my experience." Again, the ideas of expert power seemed to resonate in her explanation. On the power measure, she perceived herself to be using expert power to influence others.

Like Vivian, Joan perceived herself to be influencing others through expert power on the power measure. Joan was another woman who hesitated when she was asked to define power and said that she doesn't "think of power that much and I know that that is probably a reality." And Joan went on to define power as:

[The] ability to change others who are in somewhat [of] a different role perhaps. More like a hierarchical arrangement. Kind of what you think of as power. You think of power as someone who exerts influence on others who don't have that ability.

The interview with Joan was interesting because although she stated that she did not think about the concept of being a powerful woman very often, she articulated well how she is able to go about influencing others. Also interesting is how Joan felt about being powerful in her position. The following is an excerpt from the interview:

Q: In talking about power, how do you influence people?

A: And I don't think that power is influencing people to work to the best of their abilities. I would term that more leadership but you know that depends on how you define it. How do you influence people to work to the best of their abilities? What I would try to do is to build trust, to build respect, to have common goals to see where our common ground is and then we can move together. And also to work to the best of their abilities is to understand what their abilities are. People have strengths and weaknesses and that makes a difference in how you lead.

Q: Do you think that you're powerful in your position as superintendent of a school district?

A: I do. That's one of the reasons that I went into administration is because it is a way to effect change and I do think there is power in the superintendency because [it is] where others take their lead from the person who is leading the organization and so that sets the tone, it sets the vision, it sets kind of what is accepted here. How do we do things around here? And so I do think that there is power there.

Q: Do you see any differences in how men and women lead?

A: There are very distinct differences I think. They come from our culture I think of how we treat men and women and boys and girls. I think men see it more as a power thing than women do. I think women tend to see at least I do in more of a relational kind of thing and are sensitive to those issues. I would see that men look at authority and control. That's not an issue for me that much in controlling things. And maybe it's because women in our eyes there is a lot we don't control but that's not what drives us.

Q: The literature on power talks about men seeing power as "power over" and women seeing power as "power with or to" and that is a definite difference.

A: And that is an interesting way to put that. We [women] do things together.

Q: And what you've described to me is that is the kind of power you use.

A: That you [I] facilitate.

Q: Because you're talking about communication.

A: And you know that is fun. That is fun to help people to do things, and because that's the way it works. We've got almost 600 kids at the elementary [level] and we can't teach each one of those kids but you can help those teachers teach them.

In Joan's discussion we can see some of the ideas that Martha talked about when she said power can be positive when it is used with people. Some of these very same ideas were those that Brunner (1999) discussed coming from her study of male and female superintendents and the ideas of power over and power with/to.

Marilyn told me that the idea of serving others was a key component of how she led her school district. Marilyn perceived herself to be influencing others through referent power II on the power measure. Of the nine interview participants, Marilyn was the only one who scored highest using referent power II. And in her definition, one might see how she does use referent power II. Marilyn defined power as having the ability to connect with others. "And from that connection to be able to make something positive happen. I was just thinking that people say that knowledge is power and that is only one part of it. Power is really the ability to make something happen." Marilyn had a unique frame of reference that she relied upon to influence and motivate people.

I have three frames of reference on that. And I learned this from Lou Holtz who used to be the coach at Notre Dame. I was using a videotape series that he did on

leadership and there was one piece of it particularly that struck a chord with me. He said that when he works with a team of players, there are three things in the back of their minds that they really want to know the answers to. They want to know can I trust you, meaning will you walk your talk. The second thing they want to know is do you really stand for quality and the third thing they want to know is do you care about me as a person. And if you can convince somebody that the answer to all three of those questions is yes, then you're going to be able to influence them and make something happen. So I keep that in mind when I'm working with people.

Silent Power

As described earlier, a couple of the women hesitated when they were asked to define power and a couple had difficulty coming up with a definition. We are talking about the most powerful position in public school education and still women in the position have difficulty conceptualizing the idea of power. When put another way and asked how they influence others, they had no trouble answering. Vivian talked about influencing people "by becoming as well versed on whatever topic it is that I care to present to them. And then [I] give them reasons to believe in why I did not believe in it or do believe in it and allow them to make up their own minds." As stated earlier, I added Vivian to the small sample of interview participants because she had worked in the district for 30 years, 20 years as the superintendent. At age 62, she was the oldest interview participant. It is interesting that she was still striving to become "well versed" in important educational issues, even after being in her position for so long. At the beginning of our interview, she asked me if I was sure that I wanted to include her in my study. She stated that she "only had a Master's degree," and had been in the district for a long time. It seemed as if she was questioning her own credibility and value as someone who could "speak" for other women superintendents, someone who could be an example. Yet in my assessment of her, Vivian was an example for her staff as a powerful and

supportive leader. She was intent on telling me that though her staff knew she was a traditional disciplinarian, that she sometimes “clung” to those “old fashioned ways” she made it a point to always let her staff know she was “in their corner” and was someone who was “always there” for them. She told me she sometimes questioned her dogged determination but she also said that it has worked for 20 years, the amount of time she has been superintendent in her district

Joan said that she doesn’t often think about power in her position although she knows it probably is a reality. Several of the women did not think that the position gave them power. Maxine’s view about position power was slightly different from Joan’s. Maxine felt that those who are interested in a position as a superintendent need to know exactly why they are motivated to pursue it. She shared her unique perceptions and insight with me.

If you’re in this position for the power, you’re deluded because you don’t have any. The position is not the power. So you’re going to have to figure out how you’re going to look powerful. I’ve seen people do this. They say, ‘Well I’m superintendent.’ And all they do is run around trying to find out whom they’re going to satisfy so that they can be the superintendent. I don’t think that’s very healthy. So I’d say if you want this position because you want a power position then you need to spend a month with a superintendent. Shadow someone to see how much power they really have. Because you could probably get more power somewhere else.

When I asked Maxine why she didn’t think the position gives her power, she answered, “It gives you an open door, but once you walk in the room, you’re on your own.”

Shared Power

Many of the women talked about sharing power and giving power away in unique ways. Barb believes that she gains more power by giving it away; the more she gives

away, the more she has. “There is no job in this organization that I can do by myself. And I have lots of power when I go out and say to my colleagues, my directors, and my assistant superintendents, ‘What do you think we should do about this?’” Barb said that her power increases when she taps those appropriate resources. “My power increases ten times by doing that because right there I’ve tapped that wealth of influence and information and we are all more powerful because of that.” Marilyn achieves power through her knowledge “but that is only part of it” she stated. “Power is really the ability to make something happen. When you do something with the power and [when] you get action to happen, then you’ve achieved power.” She said that she increases her power through trust “walk your talk,” and the fact that she tries to demonstrate to her staff that she stands for quality and cares about them as people. The concept that power is shared was something that Barb, Geri, and Martha talked about. Geri talked about influencing others through shared power.

Martha wanted to emphasize that power should not be thought about in negative terms. Rather, Martha talked about power as having a positive meaning. “I think that power is often viewed as a negative term by people and they use it negatively but I see it as a positive term.” She feels power should be used 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.” Martha said that she influences people in her organization through “modeling behavior that I would expect them to portray.” She also influences others “by focusing on the target goals and objectives and attempting to show people that I’m human.” Barb also believes that she influences people through modeling and demonstration. She talked about building relationships and

how she would influence others through those relationships. “If I want people to be challenging and risk-taking, I need to be a little challenging and I need to demonstrate how to take a risk and not jeopardize the whole organization. If I write to them or I talk about research, I need to have read that research.” Marilyn also talked about power as the ability to make things happen through the connection with people. Relationships and connections were themes among the women. Maxine finds that her ability to move a system forward is based on the relationships she builds. “I think its just part of who I am and who I’ve always been. For some reason, most of my life I’ve been able to influence people.”

Laura uses referent power as a source to influence others and related her connectivity to staff through her approachability and said all of her staff knows that she keeps an open door policy to her office. “People stop by my office routinely after school.” Laura talked about her belief in “balance and connections.” She believes that “if people see why things need to work together and why I’m headed in that direction, then they will go with me. And people know I’m in their corner. People know I’ll be there for them and they typically will go with me.” Laura likes the familiarity of a small district. “I have the advantage of being in people’s classrooms and being able to meet with people individually any time I want.” She says that she never wants to be so far removed from staff and students that she can’t occasionally “give a spelling test or help a child solve a math problem.” She gave an example of how she might go about exercising power in an “indirect way.”

I can stop in a classroom and say Mrs. So and So and I talked about homework this year. What do you guys think about how it’s going? I suppose some teachers might perceive that as a little in their face but I have been know to do that. It’s not that I’m trying to be difficult but it’s just a reminder that I’m here because

kids are part of the process. But I try and keep my suggestions to teachers based on student learning so then students should be part of the evaluation. If I have the occasion that the kids say we didn't talk about that, I would say, I'm sure Mrs. So and So is going to get to that because she and I had a conversation about it. I was just wondering what she told you guys or what you've noticed. It can be a very indirect way of exercising power, I suppose.

Summary

Gilligan (1982) wrote that power is often threatening to women since a powerful woman is often a contradiction in both personal and social terms. Dunlap and Goldman (1991) maintained that the literature on school administration was dominated by the conventional definition of power as dominance and control. This conception of power which is not traditionally feminine “created unsettled discourse” for the women in Brunner’s study. “It was not their natural way of thinking or talking about power” (Brunner, 2000 p. 85).

The most dominant theme of power among the majority of the interview participants in my study was a strong orientation toward personal power. Responses to the question about influencing others emphasized expert power, which is a personal type of power (see chart presented earlier describing the power types). The majority of the women interviewed perceived themselves to be using expert power on the power measure. The women superintendents talked about themselves as being powerful by “becoming as well versed on whatever topic that I present,” “providing the resources and information,” and “knowing the research.” One woman hoped that she was a powerful person “by my background, knowledge, and my experience.” Another participant believed that the position was powerful in the sense that it could give her the best ability to effect the most change. “That is one of the reasons why I went into administration, to

effect change.” One participant stated that the position was not the power but it “gives you an open door, and once you are in, you’re on your own.” This seems consistent with Abbott and Carecheo (cited in Dunlap & Goldman, 1991) who assert that an individual does not have power, but rather exercises power when certain conditions exist.

Many of the responses to the question about defining power and influencing others also emphasized referent power. 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. Burns (1978) said that for him the leaders are power holders. “Like power, leadership is relational, collective, and purposeful . . . and for me the leader is . . . potentially the most effective of power holders . . .” (p. 18-19).

Several of the participants talked about feeling powerful when they shared power or gave power away, “the more you give away, the more you have.” Two participants talked about tapping the abilities and resources of others to help implement change. “We’re all more powerful because of that.” Another participant uses power with people, not 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.” Likewise, Brunner

(1999a) found that definitions of power from the superintendents in her study fell into the two categories of power over and power with/to. In most cases, those superintendents who defined power as “power with/to” were very collaborative in their decision-making style. Kouzes and Posner (1987) stated that when leaders give away power, they build for themselves and create power for others. Leaders can give power away by giving people important work to do on critical issues. Others are strengthened when the leader gives visibility to them by providing recognition for their efforts. This study confirms these findings. Several of the interview participants said that they made a special effort to recognize staff members in front of the board or during other events. One participant said that she frequently had staff report to the board on issues that they had worked on or had an interest in, rather than the superintendent always reporting to the board.

An interesting finding in this study and consistent with what has been documented in the literature was that many of the interview participants had difficulty defining power. They were better able to respond when asked to talk about how they influenced others. Similarly, Brunner (2000) found that women in her study had difficulty defining power, that it seemed unnatural for them. She said that because women did not feel safe to talk about power in most settings, “they did not have the language to talk about it even in the safety of a private interview” (p. 85). Gilligan (1982) wrote that power is often threatening to women since a powerful woman is often a contradiction in both personal and social terms. Dunlap and Goldman (1991) maintained that the literature on school administration was dominated by the conventional definition of power as dominance and control. This conception of power which is not traditionally feminine “created unsettled

discourse” (Brunner, 2000, p. 84) for the women in Brunner’s study. “It was not their natural way of thinking or talking about power” (p. 85).

I found talking to these wonderful women very enlightening both personally and professionally. After spending time with these women and listening to them speak so candidly about their ideas of power and how they influence others, I personally feel proud that I am a woman. And professionally, 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. 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 my research. These are “very, very good” women. Women who are out there, facing those tough decisions, making up that minority number of women superintendents, and in doing so having to rely on men to mentor them into their positions because so few women are in the role. So I say thanks to the women who were kind enough to let me into their world for a little while and with high hopes to see more women in the role, I say thanks to all those yet to come.

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