A Profile of Female Illinois School Board Presidents and Their Perceived Self-Efficacy

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This study gathered quantitative and qualitative data from female school board presidents in Illinois. Sixty-six female school board presidents completed questionnaires gathering demographic information related to their role as school board president. As well, these participants completed the Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale, LSES (Bobbio & Manganelli, 2009) identifying perceived leadership self-efficacy in six dimensions. The study has three purposes: to determine a profile of Illinois female school board presidents, to determine perceptions of their leadership self-efficacy, and to determine any relationship between characteristics and perceptions. The results of this study contribute to research which supports the nexus of higher levels of student achievement and effective superintendent and school board leadership (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2001). The role of the school board president is the fulcrum upon which the superintendent/board relationship balances. Findings revealed the female board presidents had the highest mean rating for leadership self-efficacy in the LSES dimension Choosing Effective Followers and Delegating Responsibilities.

Introduction

Positive and productive relationships between superintendents and school boards profoundly affect higher levels of district student achievement (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2001; Waters & Marzano, 2005; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). These positive and productive relationships are characterized by shared leadership, better district governance, and increased student achievement. It is a persistent challenge for superintendents and school board members to reach this governance standard (Tallerico, 1989; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). Orientation to board service and board training that defines roles, structure, processes, and self-evaluation (Eadie, 2009) lay the groundwork for productive relationships, while maintenance and development of board relations is on-going. Superintendents shoulder a significant part of this responsibility. However, the fulcrum point on this balance beam of shared leadership is the board president. Depending upon many factors and influences, the role of school board president may be "alternately described as power and [or] merely ceremonial" (Alpert, 2008, n.p.). Whether powerful or ceremonial, the superintendent and board president must develop a relationship that leads to shared leadership. What is often overlooked in developing this relationship is how the self-efficacy of the school board president can be leveraged to establish shared leadership. This can be achieved by identifying, valuing, and tapping the leadership self-efficacy a board member may bring to the table.

The self-efficacy of the board president is critical for another, often overlooked, reason. As the mean length of tenure of a school board member, 6.7 years (Hess, 2002), exceeds the typical length of tenure of a school superintendent, six years (Glass & Franceshini, 2007), the leadership of the school board president bridges the gap between administration and board of education during times of superintendent turnover. The school board president may be the sole leadership constant over a length of time or over periodic lengths of time in some districts. An efficacious board president can ensure the board does not lose its focus as district administration changes.

As more women are elected to the role of school board president, their perceived self-efficacy is worth identifying as a key to developing productive shared district leadership. The representation of women and men in decision-making at board tables and in leadership roles as CEOs and board presidents continues to be a subject of interest in academic research (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and as a subject of interest in popular literature (Sandberg, 2013). Historically school board leadership has been dominated by males. While women have increased their representation on school boards over the last several decades, from 12% in 1974 (National School Board Association, 1974) to 44% in 2010 (Hess & Meeks, 2010), men continue to hold a majority of school board seats. There have been studies concerning gender and the role of superintendent (Skrla, 2000; Garn & Brown, 2008) and studies concerning the superintendent's self-efficacy and influence on student achievement (Truslow & Coleman, 2005; Whitt, 2009). But as Mountford and Brunner (2010) suggest, "educational leadership literature lacks research focused on how gender influences decision making, in particular at the highest level of school governance, the school board table" (p. 2067). With the growing acceptance of women as school board members and their growing influence in decision making, the self-efficacy of women as school board members has grown. As their self-efficacy has grown, more women

have sought and been elected to the role of school board president. Their perceived self-efficacy is a determinant which should be identified as valuable in developing shared district leadership.

Self-Efficacy and Leadership

Self-efficacy is grounded in the theoretical framework of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory which asserts three factors, behavior, cognition, and environment, contribute to personal motivation and behaviors. The combined influences of behavior, knowledge, and environment determine self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Self-efficacy, "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3), is a key belief one would want in developing shared leadership. The self-efficacy of the school board president in fulfilling the duties of the position and in influencing board members in decision and policy making is crucial in supporting a district's goals. With the national focus on accountability, many states have legislated board training to prepare members for the complex nature of their elected positions. A complementary approach would be to gain an understanding of the self-efficacy of key members, especially board presidents, and to use this understanding in a new way to develop productive superintendent/board relationships.

Perceived self-efficacy of individuals has power in organizations. In explaining social cognitive theory, Bandura (1986) noted that personal motivations and behaviors are an exercise of control over events in life. Self-efficacy informs the choice of action to effect a change. Efficacy beliefs are informed by assessing personal knowledge and the capability to effect change, assessing the degree to which the environment will accept change, and the degree of effort one is willing to engage. In studying managers with high self-efficacy, Bandura (1988) found their self-efficacy had a positive influence on organizational attainments. Bandura (1988) concluded increased self-efficacy "became a more powerful determinant of their aspirations, strategic thinking, and organizational attainments" (p. 290).

Gist (1987) explored the implications self-efficacy may have for organizational behavior in human resource management. Gist explored practical applications from theory supported in previous studies linking self-efficacy to productivity in the areas of employment searches, insurance sales performance, and in academic research writing. Gist posited that if high self-efficacy leads to high levels of performance, then selection to positions where performance is important would certainly lead to the selection of persons with high self-efficacy. Gist asserted that self-efficacy should be considered a relevant determinant when seeking to fill positions where positive results are valued.

Bandura (1988) found social cognitive theory had applications in organizational behavior as well. He noted "the strength of groups and organizations also lies partly in people's sense of collective efficacy that they can master problems and achieve desired results by concerted group effort" (p. 286). Leadership self-efficacy of a group's leader plays a role in the collective efficacy of a group.

The purpose of this study was to determine demographic characteristics of female school board presidents in Illinois and to determine their perceived self-efficacy as a school board president. Research supports findings of higher levels of student achievement resulting from effective working relationships between superintendents and school boards (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2001). The role of the school board president in achieving this effective working relationship cannot be underestimated. This research seeks to highlight self-efficacy as a leadership concept that should not be overlooked among board members and among those

aspiring to lead the board as president. As well, this research seeks to inform administrators of the importance of understanding the self-efficacy of school board members and aspiring school board presidents as a key to more effective school district leadership.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What is the profile of female school board presidents in Illinois?
2. What are the perceptions of self-efficacy held by these women?
3. What relationships exist between any characteristics and perceptions of self-efficacy?

Method

The study was a mixed method study gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. Survey research employed the administration of a questionnaire and a leadership self-efficacy instrument. Items on the questionnaire and dimensions on the instrument offered variables for computing descriptive statistics.

Participants

The target population for this study was the 236 female school board presidents serving in Illinois in the fall of 2012. The names of these women and the addresses of the districts where they served were acquired from a website database available through the state's school board association website.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire asked about school board member service: elected or appointed to the board, number of years as board member and as board president, community type, district type and district enrollment. The questionnaire included questions of a personal nature: race, marital status, age range, level of education, occupation, if elected to other publicly elected offices and, if so, what they were and if presidents had children attending school in the district where they served. As well, the questionnaire explored perceptions of factors that contributed to their election, the degree to which presidents feel comfortable making decisions in specific areas, persons who encouraged them to serve as board president, personal motivations to serve, and the degree to which they experienced a variety of challenges.

The leadership self-efficacy instrument used in the study was the Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale (LSES) developed by Bobbio and Manganelli (2009). The LSES includes 21 items organized in six dimensions identified as those indicative of effective leadership.   The six dimensions are: Starting and Leading Change Processes in Groups; Choosing Effective Followers and Delegating Responsibilities; Building and Managing Interpersonal Relationships within the Group; Showing Self-awareness and Self-confidence; Motivating People; and Gaining Consensus of Group Members. Each dimension included a number of sentences that describe abilities associated with the dimension. The instrument asked for a response ranging from 1 =

Absolutely False to 7 = Absolutely True to indicate the degree to which the respondent identified with the statement.

Data Collection

A letter of introduction to the study, an informed consent document, the questionnaire, the LSES instrument, and a stamped, addressed return envelope were mailed to the target group. After two weeks, an additional reminder postcard was mailed to encourage responses. In total, 66 women in the target population returned completed documents, resulting in a 28% response rate.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved two phases. In the first phase, data from the questionnaires were analyzed to determine distribution, frequency, and percent. Data from the questionnaires created a profile of female school board members. As well, the questionnaire probed for perceptions of school board service which contributed data for analysis. In the second phase, data from the LSES were analyzed by item and by dimension. To determine correlations between profile characteristics and leadership self-efficacy, the researcher found Pearson correlations and conducted one-way ANOVAs.

Results

The results are reported in either table or narrative form. Demographic results concerning the type of community, the type of school district, and district enrollment where the board presidents served are reported. Illinois has three types of public school districts. They are Elementary, typically PreK through grade 8, High School, grades 9-12, and Unit, which are PreK through grade 12. Table 1 shows three sets of demographic results citing frequency and percent.

Table 1

Demographic Results

Type of Community	Number of female board presidents ($n = 66$)	Percent of female board presidents
Large city—more than 50,000 population	6	9.1
Small city—less than 50,000 population	6	9.1
Suburban—near large city	29	43.9
Rural and small town	25	37.9
Total	66	100.0

Type of School District	Number of female board presidents ($n = 66$)	Percent of female board presidents
Elementary	39	59.1
High School	6	9.1
Unit	19	28.8
Total	64	97.0
Missing	2	3.0
Total	66	100.0

District Enrollment	Number of female board presidents ($n = 66$)	Percent of female board presidents
Less than 500 students	10	15.1
500 to 999 students	13	19.7
1000 to 2499 students	19	28.8
2500 to 4999 students	19	28.8
More than 5000 students	5	7.6
Total	66	100.0

Nearly a third (31.8%) of school board presidents had school-age children in the district where they served. A majority (98.5%) of the respondents were elected rather appointed to their board seats. Only 16.7% had held other publicly elected office. The mean number of years serving on a school board was 10.87 years with a minimum number of two years of service and a maximum number of 23 years. The mean number of years serving as school board president was 5.07 years with one year as the minimum and 20 years as the maximum.

Data concerning personal characteristics of these women were analyzed. A majority (87%) of the female board presidents were Caucasian with 9% identifying as African-American and 3% identifying as Hispanic. Ninety-one percent were married. Regarding their age, a majority (71.2%) were 50 years of age or older. Table 2 shows the education levels of the board presidents.

Table 2

Level of Education

Level of Education	Frequency	Percent
High School or Equivalent	2	3.0
Some College or Other Post-Secondary Education/Training	11	16.7
Four-year College Degree	25	37.9
Some Graduate Work or Advanced College Degree	28	42.4
Total	66	100.0

An open-ended question on the questionnaire asked participants to specify their occupation. Nearly one-third, 21 of the 66 respondents, currently hold or have retired from occupations associated with education. These positions include public school teacher, substitute teacher, paraprofessional, counselor, coordinator, director, assistant superintendent, and superintendent in private schools, charter schools, and institutions of higher education. Of the twenty-one, two were retired school district superintendents and one was a retired assistant superintendent. Seven respondents identified business and finance occupations; six respondents identified office and administrative support occupations; and five respondents identified themselves as a part-time or full-time homemaker or housewife, stay-at-home mom, or mom-at-home. One respondent indicated part-time occupations of farming and substitute teaching.

Reliability statistics are reported for the Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale (LSES) results. Cronbach's Alpha was determined for the entire scale and for each dimension of the scale. All items were found to be reasonably reliable. Table 3 reports these results.

Table 3

Reliability of LSES

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale	.931	21
Dimensions	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**N of Items**
Starting and Leading Change Processes in Groups	.821	3
Choosing Effective Followers and Delegating Responsibilities	.851	4
Building and Managing Interpersonal Relationships within the Group	.666	3
Showing Self-awareness and Self-confidence	.835	5
Motivating People	.893	3
Gaining Consensus of Group Members	.726	3

Analysis of the distribution shows no evidence of the average variables being unusually skewed. Skewness ranged from -.825 to .088 with a standard error of skewness of .295.

The LSES responses to statements in each dimension were reported on a scale from 1 = Absolutely False to 7 = Absolutely True. Results for the total scale and for each dimension are reported in narrative including mean and standard deviation. The total LSES mean was 5.67 (n = 66, SD = .64). The mean for the dimension Starting and Leading Change Processes in Groups was 5.01 (n = 66, SD = .98). The mean for the dimension Choosing Effective Followers and Delegating Responsibilities was 5.91 (n = 66, SD = .85). The mean for the dimension Building and Managing Interpersonal Relationships within the Group was 5.88 (n = 66, SD = .67). The mean for the dimension Showing Self-awareness and Self-confidence was 5.84 (n = 66, SD = .71). The mean for the dimension Motivating People was 5.60 (n = 66, SD = .90). The mean for the dimension Gaining Consensus of Group Members was 5.61 (n = 66, SD = .83).

To investigate relationships between personal characteristics of school board presidents and LSES dimensions, Pearson's correlations were computed. The only LSES dimension that correlated significantly with number of years of board experience was Motivating People, r = .27, p = .03. Years of experience as board president did not correlate significantly with any of the dimensions. Having children attending the district where the board president served correlated significantly with the dimension, Choosing Effective Followers and Delegating Responsibilities, r = 28, p =.02. There was no significant effect in total LSES and women

board presidents who held other publicly elected offices and those who did not, $F (1, 64) = 1.37$, $p = .246$.

To investigate group differences in LSES, a series of one-way ANOVAs was performed. There was a significant effect in total LSES and three variables that were specific to the communities and districts where they served. They were: the types of communities where the women served as board president, $F (3, 62) = 4.59$, $p = .006$; the size of the districts where the women served as board president, $F (4, 61) = 3.44$, $p = .013$; and the types of districts where the women served as board president, $F (2, 61) = 3.45$, $p = .038$. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test found significant effect in type of community and the LSES dimension Building and Managing Interpersonal Relationships within the Group, $F (3, 62) = 2.02$, $p = .002$ and the LSES dimension Showing Self-awareness and Self-confidence, $F (3, 62) = 1.90$, $p = .008$. There was a significant effect in type of school district and the LSES dimensions Starting and leading Change Processes in Groups $F (2, 61) = 2.84$, $p = .050$ and the LSES dimension Building and Managing Interpersonal Relationships within the Group, $F (2, 61) = 1.64$, $p = .021$. There was a significant effect in district enrollment and LSES dimension Choosing Effective Followers and Delegating Responsibilities, $F (4, 61) = 2.12$, $p = .015$ and LSES dimension Showing Self-awareness and Self-confidence, $F (4, 61) = 1.39$, $p = .022$.

Discussion

The participants in this study served as school board presidents throughout the state of Illinois. Their responses to survey items determined a personal profile of these school board presidents: Caucasian, over the age of 50, married, and have a college or advanced degree. Concerning their profile as school board presidents, these women served on school boards in medium-sized, elementary school districts with enrollments of 1000 to 5000 students in metropolitan areas. A majority of the school board presidents did not have school-age children attending school in the district where they served and had not held other publicly elected offices. They averaged nearly 11 years of total board service and a little over 5 years of service as board president.

The participants' responses to items on the LSES ranged from 1 = Absolutely False to 7 = Absolutely True on each of the 21 items. The dimension Choosing Effective Followers and Delegating Responsibilities had the highest mean among the dimensions, 5.90. This result may indicate the female board presidents know their board members' interests, knowledge, and skills enabling the board presidents to engage them in school improvement efforts. The dimension Starting and Leading Change Processes in Groups had the lowest mean among the dimensions, 5.01. This result may indicate the female board presidents perceive that they are not solely responsible for starting and leading change in the district as school district change includes the leadership of the superintendent. The Leadership Self-Efficacy Scale result for the group was 5.67. Overall, the respondents had moderately high perceived self-efficacy. Future research, interviews with school board presidents who participated in the study, can provide clarity to these results.

A limitation of this study may be that only female school board presidents with higher levels of perceived self-efficacy would respond. Further research, interviews with study participants, may define in greater detail individuals' perceptions of their self-efficacy.

This study is limited to the study of perceived leadership self-efficacy of female board presidents and does not include a study of the self-efficacy of males as school board presidents. There are several studies concerning gender differences and self-efficacy (Palladino, Grady,

Haar, & Perry, 2007; McCollum & Kajs, 2009) and gender differences and leadership (Lumby, 2013; Lopez-Afria, Garcia-Retamero, & Berrios Martos, 2012). This limitation suggests the need to replicate this study to determine the perceived leadership self-efficacy of male school board presidents.

Conclusion

A recent publication *Vanishing School Boards* (Rice, 2014) asserts that while school boards are under siege, they are overlooking the opportunity to validate their existence as vital to positively impacting district achievement levels. The author devoted a chapter to describing "the interdependency role of the school board and superintendent" (p. 103) and cited specific actions this shared leadership team can take to effect student achievement. Recently, states have focused on mandated board training as a solution to achieving effective board governance, greater accountability, and student achievement. Locally, districts should look to their board members for the level of leadership self-efficacy necessary to secure these achievements. This study's findings report the perceived self-efficacy of female school board presidents in Illinois, providing an understanding of how the self-efficacy of the board president may be leveraged to achieve school district goals. The self-efficacy of the school board president is essential in successfully fulfilling the role, responsibilities, and relationships of the presidency that balance the interests and actions of the superintendent with those of the school board members. The board president's self-efficacy is the point of balance for achieving shared leadership in a school district. By bringing knowledge of board practice, experience in board/superintendent relationships, and a belief of being capable of developing effective shared leadership, the school board president with a high level of leadership self-efficacy can be a defining factor in a school district's success.

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