

Women Who Navigated the Trajectory to Superintendent: The Role of a Special Education Background

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of six women who navigated a pathway to the position of superintendent. The guiding research question was, how do women who lead suburban school districts of various sizes describe their trajectory to the position of superintendent? Themes that emerged from the one-to-one interviews were academic and professional preparation and the transferability of skills obtained from their special education background. Recommendations for boards of education and search firms include broadening the pipeline to include more women in the position of superintendent whose pathway is traditional for their professional experiences.

Introduction

A traditional career path to the position of public school superintendent includes administrative and teaching experience at the secondary level, with the position of high school principal as an indicator of being prepared (Kim & Brunner, 2009; DiCanio et al. 2016). Although this pathway might be typical for many, Munoz, Pankake, Ramalho, Mills and Simonsson (2014) found women were underrepresented among superintendents, and as Burton and Weiner (2016) noted, women were disproportionately represented in principal preparation programs. The pathway for some women to the position of superintendent includes leadership experiences gained through several administrative positions (DiCanio et al., 2016). More attention to various pathways that female superintendents navigated can provide insight to boards of education and search firms seeking to increase the pipeline of qualified candidates for the position of public-school superintendent. Guiding this study, then, was the following research question: how do women who lead suburban school districts of various sizes describe their trajectory to the position of superintendent?

Literature Review

Career Path

Kim and Brunner (2009) found "the typical pathway of women superintendents was as an elementary or secondary teacher, club advisor, elementary principal, director/

coordinator, assistant superintendent and superintendent" (p. 95). They report that most female teachers are elementary school teachers and the majority of current female superintendents (63%) have experience in secondary schools or both elementary and secondary schools. Only 35% of female superintendents had experience as a secondary principal, and 57.4% of them held directorships in central office. Women taught 9.8 years and began their administrative careers at the age of 35.9. The typical route for a male superintendent was as a secondary teacher, assistant principal, principal, and superintendent, suggesting many male administrators move directly to the position of superintendent without the experience of central office.

In the year 2000, 75% of men followed this route to the superintendency. "More than 80% of men had taught in secondary schools, and 63% of them had the experience of athletic coaching duties. Men usually taught 7.3 years and began their administrative career around the age of 31.4" (Kim & Brunner, 2009, p. 94). Sixty-five percent of men were secondary principals while only 28.7 % were a coordinator or director in central office (Kim & Brunner, 2009).

Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors (NASDSE) conducted a study regarding the role of the superintendent in promoting, developing and sustaining a culture of collaboration between general and special educators throughout Local Educational Agencies (LEA). These superintendents were selected randomly from diverse areas across the country. Four out of the seven (57%) participants held special education positions at some point in their career (Keller-Allen, 2009). Their knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions acquired in their special education positions seemed related to the position of superintendent.

Methods

To examine the lived experiences of women who are currently superintendents, we employed a phenomenological method that allowed the participants to describe during one-to-one interviews their career pathway to the position of superintendent. The semi-structured interview

protocol was developed following a review of the research literature (Burton & Weiner, 2016; Kelsey, Allen, Coke & Ballard, 2014; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Munoz et al., 2014). The interviews were transcribed and using Nvivo software, transcripts were coded for emergent themes. These themes were used to conduct a thematic analysis of patterns and discrepancies in the units of text. The units of text were used to answer the research question guiding the study: how do women who lead suburban school districts of various size describe their trajectory to the position of superintendent?

Participants

Six sitting superintendents in northeastern suburban school districts who serve communities with middle to upper income households agreed to participate in the study. A purposeful sample based on themes discussed in the research literature (Kim & Brunner, 2009; AASA, 2007, 2015) was used to recruit participants for the study: female superintendents who differed by age, ethnicity, educational

attainment, professional experience, district size they supervised, and number of years in the position. Although more detailed demographic data were provided during the interviews, to protect the identity of the participants and the school districts they lead, limited demographic data are included in the current study (see Table 1).

Results

To answer how female superintendents in northeastern suburban school districts of various sizes describe their trajectory to the position of superintendent, participants spoke about their educational attainment and professional positions held prior to the position of superintendent. During the interview, two themes emerged: academic and professional preparation and the transferability of skills obtained from their special education background. Although participants noted they made a conscious choice to be the superintendent of a smaller district, there was no difference in participants' lived experiences regarding their gender and district size.

Table 1

Participants Demographics			
Participant	Highest level of Education	Prior Professional Experience	District Enrollment
Superintendent 1	Doctorate	Physics/Math Teacher Science Chairperson Director of Science Director of Curriculum Deputy Superintendent	Grades K – 12 < 3,500 students
Superintendent 2	Doctorate	Special Education Teacher Committee on Special Education Chairperson Director of Special Education Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources	Grades K -12 < 3,500 students
Superintendent 3	Doctorate	Special Education Teacher Chairperson of Special Education Assistant Principal Director of Curriculum & Instruction Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction	Grades K – 12 > 3,500 students
Superintendent 4	Doctorate	Purchasing Agent Assistant Superintendent for Business Deputy Superintendent	Grades K – 12 > 3,500 students
Superintendent 5	Doctorate	Special Education Teacher Director of Technology Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum	Grades K -12 < 3,500 students
Superintendent 6	Doctorate	Special Education Teacher Director of Special Education Assistant Principal Elementary Principal Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum	Grades K -12 < 3,500 students

Academic and Professional Preparation

For the theme academic and professional preparation, participants indicated they held doctoral degrees and state certification required for the position of superintendent. Although their professional background varied leading to the position of superintendent, all six participants held the position of assistant superintendent and five participants held a position as a director. In addition, four of the participants had a professional background in special education: three were special education administrators and all four were special education teachers. Presented below is a sample of units of text from participants' interview data in support of the emergent theme regarding their preparation for the position of superintendent.

Assistant Superintendents

When asked how their position as an assistant superintendent prepared them for the superintendency, participants noted the following:

Superintendent 6 stated:

. . . A suburban school in New York had an opening, and I went there as a principal. I will tell you that I loved that job. I thought, I'm here for the long haul. I admired the superintendent who hired me. He was a little bit of a different thinker and huge supporter. He encouraged me to look for an assistant superintendency. After . . . six or seven years, something . . . , I applied to very few and found a home in a school district [as an assistant superintendent]. It was perfect for me because it was such a small district. And even though I was [perceived as] the curriculum person, I really was everything. [Superintendent 6 indicated she had responsibilities other than curriculum development, even though members in the organization perceived her as the "curriculum person."]

Superintendent 4 stated:

I was at [district name] from 1996 until 2002 as their assistant superintendent for business. I absolutely fell in love with the job, and with people, and made a choice to be in a smaller school district [less than 3,500 students]. Because I did not have a classroom background, I wanted to make sure that I understood the classroom, and how my decisions affected instruction in children. So, a small school environment is really what worked well for me. It worked for me that I could be with the director of special education in the office right next door, I could be talking to the athletic director, and walk out into the field, and figure out what was going on with the paint and the sprinkler system. It allowed me to be involved in just about every aspect of education, except instruction, which was in the classroom.

Superintendent 5 stated:

I mean I was a district level administrator when I was 28 years old. Some people would see that as a negative, I don't. I don't think you have to travel the path of teacher, to supervisor, to assistant principal, to principal to do this job well. And there have been some people in the past who have said, "Well you've never been a principal, what makes you think that you can be an assistant superintendent or a superintendent?" And I've said, "But you've never been <a specialist> of technology, so what makes you think that you can be [technology specialist]?" It's not one or the other, it's really, I think it's your experience and who you are. I think being smart helps. I think there is a prescribed path, but I don't subscribe to that.

Transferability of Skills Obtained from Special Education Background

Four participants in the study indicated professional positions held in the past included having experience in special education. They noted the positions called for them to interface more directly with parents, community agency representatives, and other stakeholders that required a political acumen in addition to the administrative duties required of a superintendent.

Director/Chairperson of Special Education

Superintendent 2 stated:

Prior to that [School District] as special education secondary teacher and CSE chairperson for the district. I went from teaching to CSE to district chairperson. I then started to spend some time, got more involved in terms of human resources and personnel, but I did really enjoy it. Quite honestly, of any position that I've held, if I were to say which one I could have done forever, personnel, human resources, definitely was a calling for me. It's very similar. In some ways I would say its adult special education, but in the sense of being there for people and helping people, those pieces. That's kind of the HR piece, so I never really had that in mind. My world was always special education, teaching and also working with the parents and then why not [become the superintendent]?

Superintendent 6 stated:

By the end of the second year, the special education director here in this district too, was also the person who was in charge of buses. Superintendent 6 describes one other's perception about special education as "anyone can oversee/direct special education. I became a director [of] special education. So, I started that here.

Superintendent 3 stated:

I took the [special education] chairperson's job in [district name] in July. So my son was seven months old, my daughter was almost three. I was chairperson in [district name] for eight years. Then after that, I became an assistant principal for three. After that I became the Director of Curriculum and Instruction for two years.

Special Education Teacher

Superintendent 6 stated:

I got a 0.8 position in a suburban school in New York. I took it without looking back. I was full-time before September came around, and I started my career as the speech teacher. Again, nobody knew what I did, but I did a lot with special education early on, I did mainstreaming before there was such a thing, I did inclusion before there was such a thing with friends, women who I'm still friendly with to this day.

Superintendent 2 stated:

Prior to that [district name], I was a special education secondary teacher and Committee on Special Education chairperson for the district. I went from teaching to Committee on Special Education district chairperson; because again, during that time she [administrator internship supervisor] was given a part-time position and I had just finished my internship with her. A different pathway, unlike I think most that are in this position.

Discussion and Implications

Six women who are currently superintendents described their trajectory to the position of superintendent. Using a thematic analysis for the interview data, the themes *academic and professional preparation* and the *transferability of skills obtained from their special education background* emerged. All of the participants earned their doctoral degree and state certification required for the position of superintendent. All participants were assistant superintendents and the majority of the participants had leadership experiences in special education before attaining the position of superintendent. Regarding the principalship, only one participant was an elementary school principal. The participants' trajectory is consistent with findings in the research literature regarding the professional experiences for many women who ascend to the superintendency (Kim & Brunner, 2009, Kelsey et al., 2014; DiCanio et al., 2016).

Although more studies should be conducted regarding the correlation between women's ascension to the position of superintendent and prior positions in special

education, it is interesting to note that four of the six (66.7%) participants had a background in special education as administrators or teachers. For example, as Superintendent 2 stated regarding her trajectory to the position of superintendent, "In some ways I would say its adult special education [leadership], but in the sense of being there for people and helping people, those pieces....A different pathway, unlike I think most that are in this position [of superintendent]." Similarly, Superintendent 5 stated "I don't think you have to travel the path of teacher, to supervisor, to assistant principal, to principal to do this job well....I think it's your experience and who you are. I think being smart helps. I think there is a prescribed path, but I don't subscribe to that."

Based on participants' descriptions of their trajectory to the superintendency, recruiters could increase the pipeline of qualified candidates by extending their search criteria to educators with special education supervisory experience. Superintendent 6 describes others' perceptions about special education as "anyone can oversee/direct special education. She stated, "it's do the thing called special ed".

Boards of education and other executive leaders can direct search firms to expand their criteria to include prior professional positions and experiences in special education. Women in special education administrative roles may not be considered as qualified candidates because of negative perceptions of special education as a narrow experience when these superintendents describe their special education experience as broadening their skills. Participants indicated their knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions acquired through building relationships across their special education constituents inspired innovation, helped to ensure instructional practices promoted student learning. Also, working closely with families and community members were part of their leadership practices that assisted in their preparation and trajectory to attain the position of superintendent.

Although the American Association of School Superintendents (AASA) (2015) reported inconclusive findings regarding district size and gender, preliminary findings of their study suggest that larger districts have greater interest in employing females as their superintendent than smaller districts. In the current study, participants did not report any differences regarding experiences relating to district size and their gender. Thus, further research in this area might provide insight to the correlation between higher interest in employing women for the position of superintendent and the size of the district. Finally, the search criteria used to increase the pipeline for aspiring superintendents needs to include multiple roles that enable educators to relate with parents and the larger community.

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