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Up from Poverty: A Narrative Non-Fiction Study of Three Female Superintendents from Poverty

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This study focused on three female superintendents from poverty and how they elevated out of poverty to become successful superintendents in their school districts and help students living in poverty.

Background of the Problem. The United States Census Bureau (2014) reported there were 4.2 million children under the age of 12, who live in poverty. The superintendent of schools, as Sampson and Davenport (2010) and Katz (2005) remarked, is the highest-ranking administrator to lead change. Out of the 76% of the female teacher pool, only 23% of the school superintendents were identified as female (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The problem is that there is little data on female superintendents who came from poverty and how they elevated to superintendent. The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences and leadership practices of female superintendents that came from a life of poverty to understand how they overcame a life in poverty and became a superintendent and how they address the needs of students who live in poverty in their school districts. This research is significant because only one study was found that focused on the female superintendent from poverty, Smith (2014), which identified three female superintendents who grew up in poverty.

This study was guided by the intersectionality of feminist theory and poverty for a springboard of social justice which explains the lives that people live that are multilayered and derived from social relations and history (Association for Women's Right and Development, 2004).

Methodology

The research design chosen for this dissertation was narrative non-fiction story method. This method was chosen because it allows the voice of the participants, as female superintendents, to express their lived experiences in their own words of growing up in poverty. The following research question guided this research: After transitioning through the stages of life, what are the lived experiences of female superintendents from poverty that enabled them to elevate out of poverty to lead a district with most of the students living in poverty? The participants were chosen through a mutual contact and the snowball method. Hays and Singh (2012) clarified the snowball method as identifying a contact, asking them if they have knowledge of other participants thus allowing the first contact to help identify others. Each participant was a practicing female superintendent who had been raised in Texas in poverty.

Data Collection. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The researcher extracted information from each interview in an effort to expose what Creswell (2013) called epiphanies or turning points in the female superintendents' life. After each meeting, the interview notes

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were transcribed and organized into private and personal stories that linked diverse events in their lives Polkinghorne (1998). A digital recorder used to in this study was the Olympus VN-7200 digital voice recorder. The NVivo 11 program was used to assist in the management of the qualitative data. Data analysis was conducted through the research conducted multiple readings of the data and then determining emergent themes from the readings. The themes were compare across the interview stories. To provide for reliability and validity, the researcher used triangulation and rich, thick descriptions. Additionally, the researcher shared the transcribed notes with the participants to ensure accuracy of their stories.

Findings and Discussion

Dr. R. is an African-American female who served as superintendent for District A for many years. In her district, Dr. R. was faced with more than 80% of her district claiming economically disadvantaged status. As a child, Dr. R. did not know or believe that she lived in poverty. After her mother and father went their separate ways, she was given to her grandparents to raise at the age of sixteen months. She remembers living off the land for most of her food. Her grandfather had a fourth-grade education but her grandmother had made it through eighth-grade. Her grandmother was big on education. Clothing was a huge point of contention with Dr. R. as a teen, because her grandmother made all her clothing. This is when she knew things were different. In high school, she suffered through many occasions where she was teased because of body odor. Her grandmother taught her to use only talcum powder as deodorant which proved to be inefficient. There were many days where she had to endure hateful words, bullying and the teasing at the hands of her classmates.

After completing high school, Dr. R. married at the age of eighteen but always knew that she would graduate from college. While problems began to drive a wedge between her and her husband, Dr. R. found a job at a daycare. The owners of the daycare noticed her and began to encourage her to go back to school. She obtained her bachelor's degree and began her teaching career. Taking the advice of a professor, Dr. R. left her school district to take a job as principal. Dr. R. applied to three schools for a superintendent position and found success on her third attempt.

Mrs. C. leads District B with more than 60% of her district in economically disadvantaged status. Growing up, she lived with her father, mother and siblings. Being the oldest of four children, Mrs. C. remembered more of the hard times than any of her siblings. Her family moved multiple times. When the family came to live with her grandparents, Mrs. C. had chores on the family farm. With living experiences so tough, and the constant moving around, Mrs. C. began to have gaps in her learning. "I remember having some very key teachers through my elementary grade years that were helpful." Her parents were trying to get on their feet and her dad got some land and had a "Jim Walter's house." Tragedy would find the family. The very first day my mom went to work, our house burned down. The family moved back in with Mrs. C.'s grandparents again. The pain of losing her home, school and friends was something of a hardship for Mrs. C. but she survived it because of the support from her family and teachers. Her next hero was her homemaking teacher who exposed her to Future Homemakers of America. Teachers began to encourage her to attend college and her sights were set on majoring in fashion merchandising until she encountered a history teacher by the name of Mr. Holcomb. He encouraged her to be a teacher. She got a scholarship to help pay for college. She graduated college and became a teacher. With the encouragement of her husband, Mrs. C. applied and received her first superintendent position.

Mrs. L. identified herself as having survived situational poverty. Mrs. L. was born into a loving home where her mother stayed home until the children were five and her father worked as a truck driver. Times were hard for the young family but love was an abundant emotion felt by all the children. Money was scarce and frivolous spending was not allowed. She dreamed of teaching so much that she was anxious to spend time in her grandfather's Biology classroom in Palestine, where he taught for 43 years. She began to work at an early age and never looked back. Mrs. L. continued to work her way through college. Times were hard but in a different way. Mrs. L. felt the sting of being a female in a male dominated career. With grit and tenacity Mrs. L. achieve her life goals. As a female superintendent from poverty, Mrs. L. believes that she must serve all students in her community in the best way possible.

Discussion

Each participant began by telling the story of their family and the situations they lived through. All three participants had contact with their mother and father while growing up but were sincerely influenced by their grandparents in some way. As a child living in poverty, the education and attitude of family members played an important role in their lives. Dr. R. expressed gratitude for the upbringing that she received at the hands of her grandmother. Mrs. C. lived on and off with her grandparents but discussed the feeling of safety she experienced when living with them. Mrs. L. admired her grandfather and would often visit his classroom just to sit and watch the interaction between him and his students. As a child, the three female superintendents expressed, with the abundance of love given by the family that they did not realize that they were living in poverty.

As teens, the influence of family members continued for all three. For Dr. R., the influence of her grandmother continued. Mrs. C. spoke of her father more because of the hardships that were happening during this time. Mrs. L. spoke of her mother being a big influence in her life at this point.

As adults, in reflection, each female superintendent expressed that she would not be the person she was if she had not gone through those experiences in her life. All used the experiences that they lived through with family to not only become the best superintendent they could be but the best person they could be.

The emergent themes that connected for all women to elevate out of poverty were positive relationships, love and care from individuals from schools and church, encouragement and help from others in their lives, and religion. Their school experiences impacted their understanding and knowledge that their experiences had been different from many others in their classes. Additionally, two of the participants shared that their family did not have the knowledge to help them understand how to access college.

All three participants shared that their life experiences gave them a unique perspective on how to help their students from poverty as well a working with their faculty to understand issues of poverty. They also found ways to encourage and educate families about access to college.

Conclusions, Implications for Practice, and Recommendations

The key conclusions from this study are the role of education, attitude of family members, positive relationships between key adults, and religion's impact. The role that education and attitude of family members of children are significant in the development of the child in poverty. Positive relationships with key people are helpful to encourage the student from poverty to reach higher and dream bigger. Since teachers spend a large amount of time with

students daily, they can foster the concept of resiliency (Marapodi, 2001). All three female superintendents identified at least one person who made a difference in their life at different stages. The use of religion to remain focused on goals was a key aspect for them. Schieman (2011) pointed out that families living in poverty use religion to make major decisions in their lives.

There are three salient points that guide the implications from the study. Family, key relationships and religion are the three main areas that provide support for students living in poverty. All three female superintendents identified a trusted individual who provided them with the support that they needed during pivotal points in their life as a child. The participants identified support systems that were available to them when they were advancing through life. All three female superintendents identified grandparents who were instrumental in their success. They all also identified at least one educator who provided them with the support they needed to hope for a better future. They identified religion as a source of support for them during some of the toughest times in their lives.

Recommendations for future research could examine the male perspective on the effects of poverty and leadership, determine a larger sample of superintendents and their perspectives on how to impact education for poverty students, and explore the similarities and difference between gender of leaders' and their actions related to rising from poverty.

Recommendations for practice include having superintendents develop programs that allow parents the opportunity to attend classes on college and career preparation and require teachers provide students with numerous opportunities to experience different types of social and academic excursions that will broaden their horizons. Principal preparation programs and superintendent programs should include a cultural awareness component that require college students to immerse themselves in a day in the life of a poverty student. University preparation program should provide opportunities for parents to earn certifications for employment through their child's school.

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