Special Issue
The Gender Dynamics of Educational Leadership Preparation: A Feminist Postmodern Critique of the Cohort Experience

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The purpose of this study was to examine gender dynamics in educational leadership doctoral cohorts and explore the propensity for educational leadership programs to unintentionally perpetuate inequity through continued silence and unawareness of issues related to gender. The study includes narratives from two women cohort members and two professors (one man, one woman), detailing their experiences in an educational leadership preparation program at the pseudonymous Southern University. The authors conclude that it is important for students and faculty to proactively engage gender inequity in both professional venues and during informal interactions. Professors who engage in these conversations create opportunities for students to facilitate discussions regarding gender inequity in educational leadership. The cohort model allows students to be in a supportive environment where difficult conversations can take place, but it can also perpetuate inequity and oppression unless gender dynamics are interrogated and dismantled.

Women continue to be underrepresented in educational leadership positions (Grogan, 1999; Hodgins, 2007; Trinidad & Normore, 2005). A great disparity exists when comparing the number of women teachers with the number of women who hold administrative positions (Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007). While there may be alternate explanations, researchers have suggested that one reason for this disparity is due in part to social and cultural perceptions that women do not fit the mold of deep-seeded masculine conceptions of leadership (Adkison, 1981; Grogan, 1999; Northouse, 2009; Rusch, 2004). Some studies have found differences between male and female leadership styles, with the majority of

employers looking favorably upon those who possess such attributes as authoritative, decisive, and traits commonly associated with men (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Blount, 1998; Shakeshaft et al., 2007; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000, Trinidad & Normore, 2005). Women's experiences in educational leadership are vastly different from the men as they struggle to prove themselves as worthy as their male counterparts (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996). Some women in K-12 and higher education settings struggle with the unequal division of labor, the tendency to report views and experiences from the male perspective, and the overall lack of awareness regarding gender issues as they relate to educational leadership practice and preparation (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Skrla et al., 2000; Trinidad & Normore, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to examine gender dynamics of educational leadership preparation in a doctoral cohort and to consider the propensity for educational leadership programs to perpetuate gender inequity through continued silence and unawareness. The following questions guided our inquiry and prompted us to reflect and then begin a systematic and iterative dialogue about the cohort experience:

- Does the educational leadership program encourage or reinforce traditional gender roles among students within the doctoral cohort?
- What role does silence and unawareness play among both cohort members and university professors in perpetuating or dismantling gender roles and dynamics?

This study includes narratives written by two women cohort members and two professors (one woman, one man), detailing experiences at the pseudonymous Southern University. Each narrative includes individual experiences and perceptions reflecting the impact of gender on their personal and professional lives that carry over into the leadership preparation program. Prior to the narratives, a literature review will address silence and unawareness of sexism through feminist views and the benefits and pitfalls cohorts may experience as a community of learners, followed by the theoretical framework and methods used. The discussion includes both individual and collective lessons learned as well as recommendations for leadership preparation programs to move towards equity and awareness.

Moving from Silence to Dialogue: Women as Leaders

Women are underrepresented in school and system level leadership positions (Criswell & Betz, 1995; Trinidad & Normore, 2005). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2006), women make up 75% of teaching positions in the United States, yet they occupy only 58.7% of principal positions at the elementary level and 26.9% at the secondary level (p.47).

Silence and unawareness are common themes in relation to gender dynamics and experiences held by

women administrators. In a qualitative study of women superintendents, participants described their experiences working in what they considered to be a male-dominated field (Skrla et al., 2000). Discussing the tendency for individuals to remain silent in terms of gender inequality, they each discussed the organizational and institutional silence related to their tenure as superintendent. The individuals studied also divulged their compulsion to self-censure and remain in personal silence, suppressing their thoughts and feelings because of their own unawareness, the lack of comfort, or lack of support in bringing the issue to light (Skrla et al., 2000). Interviews with women superintendents conducted by Brunner (2000) revealed the unsettled talk of power by women administrators. Several women superintendents had difficulty defining power since the term seemed so unnatural to them (Brunner, 2000; Trinidad & Normore, 2005). From a feminist view, power tends to be defined as collaborative, sharing power with others, nonhierarchical, and consensus building (Bjork, 2000; Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 1999; Hodgins, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Trinidad & Normore, 2005). If women do not fit the dominant culture's view of what an educational leader looks and acts like, then they may be less likely to be viewed as possible candidates for roles as leaders, particularly with boards and other stakeholders operating under traditional conceptions of school leadership (Ridenour & Twale, 2005; Skrla et al., 2000). Northouse (2007) maintains that in the discussion of leaders, it is not unusual for leaders to

be described as wielders of power, as individuals who dominate others (p. 7). This begs the question: Can the meaning of power viewed predominantly from the white man's perspective create a continuous cycle of inequity for women leaders? Despite an increase of women pursuing administration, school districts continue to disproportionately hire White men as building level leaders (Trinidad & Normore, 2005). Findings in Rusch's (2004) study suggested that the fear of the discourse actually sustained a functionalist view of leading, which in the end perpetuated traditional cultural views of educational leaders. The study revealed that in a ten-year span, between 1991 and 2001, only 245 dissertation abstracts using the keywords, leadership, principals, and gender; 94 dissertation abstracts using the keywords, leadership, superintendents, and women, and 93 dissertation abstracts using the keywords, leadership, superintendents, and gender were found in a basic search. Lather's (1992) concept of advocacy inquiry is described as a conscious and intentional use of research "to help participants understand and change their situations" (see Rusch, 2004, p. 16). Drawing from Lather's concept of advocacy inquiry, attention to this gap in literature should be revealed through the curriculum in educational leadership programs to alert rising researchers of the need for further research on the topic of women leaders in the secondary setting and superintendency in order to help break the cycle of unawareness. It is plausible that the gap in research on women administrators in the secondary setting

and superintendency persists in graduate educational leadership programs, the question remains, why?

The discourse about gender in educational leadership preparation programs may occur as faculties design the program and coursework (Rusch, 2004), but this is hardly commonplace. Rusch notes that "although individuals enrolling in graduate leadership programs may come from diverse and dynamic communities, as students they frequently experience minimal coursework related to diversity" (p. 15). Leadership preparation programs should reflect diversity and allow for more than minimal experiences through research and dialogue. Papalewis (1995) (cited in Young & McLeod, 2001) argued that leadership programs which failed to include literature reflecting women's experiences may be more of a disadvantage to women and hinder their growth in leadership.

An in-depth study at the university level reported that female professors were assigned more teaching and advising responsibilities, leaving little room to pursue research interests (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996). Women in the university appear to have feelings of disappointment and disillusionment, putting forth more of an effort with a disproportionate share of the responsibilities for less important, mundane tasks leaving little time available for research (Acker & Feuerveger, 1996). Advocating for social justice in the development of women leaders requires raising awareness and providing research in order to discover truths (Lather, 1992). Leadership preparation programs should be a time

for openness and questioning assumptions, making way for intellectual dialogue and research viewed through different lenses. The purpose of including research and theories constructed by women in educational leadership programs is not to detract from research from men but to inspire equity and norms through another lens.

Talking about equity and sexism is not an easy or comfortable task. In fact, Rusch (2004) pointed out that the controversy that surrounds the topic of equity is not a simple task in an educational leadership preparation program or for an education department. It is much easier to continue the silence than to be challenged with conflict and emotions. Hook (1994) (as cited in Rusch, 2004) pointed out that "confronting one another across differences means that we must change ideas about how we learn; rather than fearing conflict we have to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth" (p. 42). The fear of bringing difficult conversations into educational leadership preparation programs is not simply a fear of discomfort, but may actually reflect a fear of rocking the boat so much that one is dumped out. The structures in place related to promotion and tenure within higher education may act to reinforce silences around difficult topics; uncomfortable students may give those courses lower ratings, and uncomfortable colleagues may vote less favorably on promotion and tenure. Meyerson and Scully's (2001) work on tempered radicalism addressed the challenges of provoking change within

systems resistant to the very changes sought. Tempered radicals must see the changes needed and strategically set about making change by "acting in ways that are appropriate professionally and authentic personally and politically" (Meyerson & Scully, 1995, p. 587). Professors and graduate students in educational leadership programs seeking to make educational institutions more socially just may need to be tempered radicals; they need to challenge the status quo while still maintaining their place within the organization.

The Cohort: A Community for Dialogue?

Saplon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott (2001) defined cohorts as groups of students who move through their education program together, sharing coursework and developing a sense of community and support (p. 351). While there is an abundance of research that legitimizes how the cohort structure provides support to doctoral students (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; McPhail, Robinson, & Scott, 2008; Ridenour & Twale, 2005; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Witte & James, 1998; Zhao, Reames, & Reed, 2004), Scribner and Donaldson (2001) pointed out that each group is unique, and the dynamics among group members differ depending on factors such as levels of support and training on group dynamics.

The supportive nature of the cohort structure could prove beneficial to women since research showed that women benefit from support systems for program completion and attainment

of leadership positions (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Hopkins, O'Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008; Hodgins, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Kurtz-Costes, Helmke, & Ulku-Steiner, 2006; Ridenour & Twale, 2005; Trinidad & Normore, 2005; Young & McLeod, 2001). The cohort structure supports growth and development of its members by creating an environment that is collaborative in nature and fosters bonds among students (McPhail et al., 2008).

Interpersonal relationships among cohort members may influence the cohort experience, professional relationships, and practices (Barnett et al., 2000; McPhail et al., 2008; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Barnett et al. (2000) noted that group dynamics within effective cohorts have the potential to create pathways for students to feel important, have a sense of belonging, and feel accepted for their knowledge and contribution to the group. Cohorts that establish feelings of mutual respect and trust both provide a place for critical reflection and the development of shared understanding and provide a place that encourages and sustains multiple perspectives (McPhail et al., 2008). The nature of the cohort model has the potential to increase awareness and close the gap for women leaders if leadership preparation programs intentionally create opportunities for men and women to participate in dialogue and reflect on research and theory from multiple views through a safe learning environment.

Ridenour and Twale (2005) studied cohorts and noted that students in cohorts are more likely to support risk-taking behaviors due to bonds that

are formed among students. It is important for leadership preparation programs to purposefully provide opportunities for students to create these strong bonds in order for students to move from silence to dialogue on issues that can be uncomfortable. Rusch (2004) suggested that avoidance of equity discourse in leadership preparation programs leads to similar avoidance in schools due to the lack of learned skills and knowledge needed to confront issues of gender. Leadership preparation programs that use the cohort model should provide safe and supportive environments where the cycle of silence and unawareness can be broken. A community of learners can be formed between professors and students when trusting relationships are developed and safe learning environments have been established. As continuous learners, the cohort model has the potential to create opportunities for meaningful discussions about gender discourse, research on men and women who have significantly impacted the field of education, and theories from traditional and feminist views.

Theoretical Framework

As this study was concerned with understanding and interrogating the gender dynamics of an educational leadership preparation cohort, we adopted a postmodern feminist perspective. Grogan (2000) articulated several advantages to this perspective when investigating gender dynamics in educational leadership. Among these

advantages is that a postmodern feminist perspective:

- Recognizes gender as a legitimate category of analysis;
- Emphasizes the particular importance of women's subjective experiences;
- Is grounded in an ethic of social critique and resistance toward injustice, and
- Seeks to identify dominant and subordinate discourses related to knowledge and power.

The marginalization or exclusion of women's experiences on leadership in education amounts to male epistemological hegemony. At best, the hegemony of a male way of understanding leadership renders our understanding of educational leadership practice inadequate, and at worst it suggests that much of "what we know" about educational leadership may be entirely wrong for its marginalization of women's experiences and perspective (Riger, 1992). Our intent in studying the gender dynamics in the educational leadership preparation cohort at Southern University was to (a) understand women's subjective experiences in the program, (b) critique formal and informal gender dynamics of cohort experiences, (c) identify forms of resistance and compliance, and (d) identify discourses related to knowledge and power. Importantly, we were interested in both emic and etic understandings of the gender dynamics of the cohort experience. This interest led us to include not only two cohort members (Christy and Molly) but also two cohort faculty members (Lisa and

Jeff). The decision to include a male perspective on gender dynamics was inspired by a recognition that the fight for gender equity is not solely women's struggle; it is incumbent on men to work actively to dismantle oppression rather than perpetuate it through their complicity or silence (Hooks, 1992).

Research Design

As Marshall and Young (2006) note, "gender research designs must often transgress boundaries and locate gender and education issues beyond schools, encompassing their cultural, political, and economic contexts, and presenting uncomfortable challenges to dominant practice" (p. 74). As such, this study employed a three-phase narrative and iterative design punctuated by a critical incident. Phase One occurred naturalistically as dialogues between two students (Molly and Christy) and two faculty members (Lisa and Jeff) as general conversations about interpersonal and group dynamics in the cohort. These dialogues included gender, but also touched on issues of race, class, privilege, culture, and many other dynamics. During this phase, Molly and Christy and Lisa and Jeff, in dyadic relationships, developed trust in each other, which allowed conversations and reflection to occur at an ever-deepening level (Brooks & Tooms, 2008). The first critical incident occurred when Christy and Molly read two articles in a class taught by Jeff: *Ella Flagg Young: Pioneer of Democratic School Administration* (Webb & McCarthy, 1998) and *Sexism, Silence, and Solutions: Women Superintendents Speak Up and*

Speak Out (Skrla et al., 2000). Their reactions to the incident are explained in their narratives in the subsequent section, and led directly to a more intentional phase of the research. Phase Two began when the four of us decided to share our experiences. This began tentatively and included a great deal of negotiation and trust-building discussions. Phase Three commenced with the decision to write our individual dialogues, share them with each other in the form of narrative research, and examine the differences and similarities in our narratives as a form of research (Shields & Edwards, 2005; Shields, LaRocque, & Oberg, 2002). The results of this final phase constitute the narratives in this article.

Narratives

Molly's Story

Gender roles were clearly defined in my family. My mother was responsible for cooking, cleaning, and caring for the kids, while my father was the primary wage earner in the home, and the disciplinarian. Those traditional roles trickled down to us as the males were responsible for taking out the trash, walking the dog, and making the occasional late night trips to the corner store, while the females stayed in the kitchen as meals were being prepared, learning from my mother, and eventually helping make family dinners. Growing up, we received conflicting messages in terms of values and life lessons. While father stressed the importance of education, leading to financial independence, my mother appeared to focus more on family and

raising kids. She conveyed the message that all women should aspire to get married and have kids, events she saw as the defining point in the lives of women, views reflective of her South Carolina upbringing.

When I began working in the school system, there was some talk of how gender impacted individuals being promoted to higher positions and receiving tenure. Although I heard of numerous accounts, I had no firsthand knowledge of such until I became an administrator. Having been an administrator for several years, I recall several situations where a male teacher or administrator was simply not performing, or had engaged in some questionable behavior, but was retained the following school year, while female teachers and administrators, in similar situations, were released or non-renewed. Because I'm a building-level administrator, I cannot speak to what appeared to be inconsistency among dismissal of administrators because district level officials make those decisions. However, the inconsistencies related to the dismissal of ineffective teachers were evident. It's as if male teachers were held to a different standard than females. Discrepancies also appeared in the criteria used to assess teachers' performance. While women tended to be evaluated on their knowledge of content material, ability to teach students, and classroom management, male teachers were often considered worth keeping if they were simply able to maintain order in their classroom.

I've also noticed what appears to be a double standard as it relates to women and men leadership qualities. So often, a male administrator that's assertive, firm, consistent, and headstrong is described as a good leader, "exactly what the school needs"; however, a woman with similar qualities is referred to as a bitch. According to the literature review, men are hired in leadership positions more often than women because those qualities associated with strong leadership are qualities often perceived as being possessed more often by men (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Trinidad & Normore, 2005). If searching for individuals with specific leadership qualities, why aren't more women who possess these qualities being hired to fill vacancies? I am interested in finding out if women who possess such "desired" qualities are hired at a rate significantly larger than other women.

In the summer of 2008, I interviewed for the doctoral program. I was as nervous as I was excited. Nervous because I was a bit intimidated that others applying for the program were employed at the district level, in higher positions, yet excited because this could very well be the beginning of a new chapter in my life. As I sat there waiting to be interviewed, I met several other potential candidates, all of whom impressed me by their conversations. My level of anxiety eased, as I felt totally comfortable with the others. There was one female in particular, Christy, that I instantly bonded with. We have similar backgrounds, shared interests, and both possess a strong desire to excel.

From the beginning of classes, I began meeting other members in the

cohort and found myself separating those individuals I felt were highly intellectual and motivated from others I saw as unmotivated, slacking, or appearing to simply go through the motions. It was easy to identify those who were serious about their education and professional growth and those who were there to simply get a degree—there were always a few individuals asking questions about the assigned reading because they had not prepared for class. During class discussions, individuals who hadn't read the material would intentionally stray off subject as an effort to contribute to the group without revealing their lack of knowledge of subject matter. This left me wondering if our professors were aware of the lack of preparation among some cohort members.

Two of our professors, one woman and one man, actually addressed the issue. The woman professor had a "talk" with the group regarding the amount of time and effort expected out of doctoral students, and the need to read in order to be able to positively contribute to the class. She obviously saw that many weren't prepared for class. I'm not sure why, but that evening I somehow felt a sense of pleasure knowing she was aware that not everyone wasn't adequately preparing for class. The following semester, our male professor announced that those individuals who hadn't read the material were excused to leave class. Again, I felt a small amount of satisfaction that professors were communicating high expectations and individual students were held accountable.

Group work was a definite source of stress for me in the program. I had many negative experiences working with groups prior to the program and was not looking forward to working collaboratively. At work, and in my personal life, if I have a project that requires me to work collaboratively with others, I surround myself with those who have a similar work ethic and drive to get the job done. When assigned to groups throughout the doctoral program, I had the opportunity to work with many individuals and have had several unpleasant experiences. I immediately saw that a number of individuals were less motivated than the majority of us. While we were allowed to choose group members for some assignments, other work involved the random assignment of groups by the professor. It is the latter arrangement that tested my patience and brought a certain level of anxiety. I found myself constantly taking the lead and many times taking over, telling others what to do. It was almost as if group members were just standing around waiting on someone to provide direction, and my lack of patience coupled with strong desire to "just do it," led to my tendency to get the group going. My actions obviously backfired as certain cohort members tended to rely solely on me to carry the group, keep them informed of upcoming assignments, and even provide brief overviews of the assigned readings.

Most frustrating was the trend I saw developing with the men in our cohort. It was as if they, with the exception of one, were dependent on us (women) to do the bulk of the work,

assign them a portion to be responsible for, and even instruct them on how to cover their assigned material. The vast majority of the men in our cohort looked for direction and guidance from us. Although disturbed by what I saw, I continued to take the lead on projects, assigning individuals parts I thought they could manage. By telling myself, "if you want something done right, you've got to do it yourself," I justified my actions of taking control of the group. The situation irritated me to no end as I realized the more I did, the more certain individuals expected.

It was during a conversation with Christy that I realized I needed to stop doing the work of others. She was also frustrated with the division of labor and vowed not to allow it to continue. Tired of doing for them what they needed to do for themselves, we made a pact to force others to do their share by being unavailable to direct, guide, or provide any form of assistance. In an activity open to the public, she and I were in a group with three males who appeared to be uncomfortable with the task at hand. During the planning phase, immediately looking to us for direction, they constantly asked,

"Is this ok?"
"What do you think I should do?"
"How should we proceed?"

After receiving no direction from us, with feelings of frustration, the comments turned to "Just tell me what you want me to do." It was then that Christy began using the phrase, "You've got to figure it out for yourself," a statement I've borrowed and have used several times, including at work when colleagues wanted to make their lack of preparation an emergency for me to handle.

Through my experiences within the cohort, I've learned a very important lesson regarding group work—stick to what you know. Whenever possible, I partner with Christy, the individual I initially had a connection with, the individual with similar interests, goals, and most important a strong work ethic—someone I can always rely on to pull her own weight. So many of our men cohort members look to the women to provide the nurture, care, and support they receive from their wives and mothers. In their eyes, it translates to someone else doing the work for them. And while some women feel comfortable in the motherly role, encouraging such behaviors, I'm definitely not one of them.

Although it's much easier to point the finger at others, I must also reflect on my behaviors and mannerisms, looking for actions that might encourage helplessness or over-dependence. Perhaps my desire to control and my tendency to dominate situations carry over to the doctoral cohort, sending the message, "I'll take care of it." Perhaps my own actions were encouraging and supporting the very situation I now take exception to.

An incident worth mentioning occurred during second semester when I was educated on the life and legacy of Ella Flagg Young. It's amazing that through three college degrees, obtained at three different schools, I had never been introduced to this lady—the one individual arguably more important

than anyone else we've learned about in the educational realm—before my doctoral program. Approximately half the class had no knowledge of her or her impact on education, although she's definitely someone we should've learned of early in our educational career.

The doctoral program is encouraging me to be reflective, inquisitive, and scholarly. It has been a wonderful, yet eye-opening experience that I've thoroughly enjoyed. Although the journey hasn't been without its challenges, the cohort model has benefited me in a number of ways. The cohort model allowed me to work collaboratively with others, even forcing me out of my comfort zone. Because we began the program together, we were able to get to know each other, learning from each other's experiences, realizing individuals' strengths as well as being supportive of those areas in need of improvement. By far, the greatest advantage of being in the cohort for me has been the process of developing a professional relationship and a lifelong friendship. Christy and I began as cohort members and collaborators, and we are now close friends. We're able to share each other's victories, provide support through rough times, as well as serving as a critical friend to one another by having those difficult conversations that are sometimes needed.

Despite the challenges I've encountered within the doctoral program, and continue to struggle with to some degree, the benefits far outweigh the discomfort. In fact, I'm convinced that if the personality

conflicts and tension within the group were addressed from the start, perhaps we would be in a better place, or at least have a better understanding of our commonalities as well as the individual differences that make us unique. I'm a firm believer of addressing problems when they arise, not allowing negative feelings and ideas to grow and fester.

I can understand why some professors might not engage in facilitating those uncomfortable conversations; however, the opportunity presented itself and almost went unnoticed. This semester, during a class discussion, the issue came up and several of us discussed the challenges we faced, even admitting to the role we played in hindering the cohort's efforts to become one cohesive group. For some, myself included, the tension was a result of power struggles as we, comfortable with our group roles, struggled to find our identity within the larger group. Other cohort members may have had conflict between each other because they have similar personality traits and, therefore, clash in the midst of group projects. Henceforth, with a professor skilled in the art of facilitation, the conversation could have served as a monumental turning point for our cohort. However, because the conversations were short-lived, occurring only during a class break, it's unclear what each group member took away from the discussion, yet there was great potential for growth. Of the individuals who spoke of the difficulties of coming together as one group, none of the men contributed to the discussion. This is worthy of mentioning as it has become the norm for the males

in our cohort to sit back and observe, allowing the females to take the lead, facilitate discussions, and make decisions.

It has been suggested that the faculty follow-up on our conversations in some manner, addressing the difficulties and struggles we encountered to evaluate and make improvements for future doctoral cohorts. A professor well versed and knowledgeable in addressing uncomfortable topics, serving as a mediator, could provide the safe, supportive environment needed, and encourage cohort members to discuss their unpleasant feelings and experiences encountered throughout the program. Doing so at an earlier stage in the program might have alleviated some of the uncomfortable feelings experienced by cohort members as we attempted to find our way, collaborate with others, and progress through the program. Nevertheless, each experience is an opportunity to grow. While each term brings something new, I'm continuing to enjoy the journey, anxiously awaiting what's on the horizon.

Christy's Story

I have a very distinct and vivid memory of my father giving me advice that made a lasting impression. He told me that I needed to go back to school and make sure I had a career so I wouldn't have to depend on anyone other than myself. I was 18 years old, a single parent, a high school dropout, on food stamps and welfare, and feeling like I had been beaten by life. I came to a crossroad, one where I could choose to

continue to live in poverty, or I could choose to become an educated and independent woman. I include this part of my history because it was a defining moment of making a choice to escape poverty. My life history shapes how I feel about education and why I believe I am highly motivated. Moving away from being government dependent and embarking on a new path to becoming an independent woman was the right choice, but not an easy one. Defining myself as a woman continues to be a difficult and sometimes confusing task when working in a field dominated by men at the level I'm currently at.

I began my journey as a secondary education science major. In the science department of the college I attended for my undergraduate degree, the majority of the students and professors were men. Looking back at this experience, I recognize that this is when I started building my own assumptions about how to communicate with men in a scholarly environment and what leaders look and act like. All of the leaders in the science department at this southern college were men. I took my lived experiences from college and continued to build on my assumptions of how leaders should look and act as I began my career working in a high school. (As a high school science teacher, I have only worked for male principals. Our school district has never hired a woman high school principal.)

After being in the classroom for six years, I went back to school and earned my master's degree in counseling and eventually obtained my add-on in leadership and an educational specialist in leadership and

administration. During my specialist degree, I attended a leadership preparation program where two of my professors in the educational leadership program were women superintendents; one was a former superintendent, and the other was a current superintendent. Both of these women were clearly different in their demeanor and leadership style. I remember being particularly interested in their dispositions, their mannerisms, and how they related to others. I was trying to figure out how I was supposed to act as a woman administrator. After all, this was my first experience and opportunity to talk to women who were in high-level administrative positions. My other professors, who were superintendents, were men; two were current superintendents, and the other professor was a retired superintendent. I remember feeling at ease with these professors and was more intent on learning the content they presented and less worried about wondering how to communicate with them. It was quite easy having conversations and class discussions with the male professors. Where as with the female professors, I found myself feeling pressured to say the right thing or look a certain way. I was unaware until my recent reflections that I was more comfortable being taught and lead by men than I was by women. I'm assuming that I felt that way because my only lived experiences at that time was under the leadership of men at the college level and at the high school setting. My entire career has been under the supervision of men. I recall being uncomfortable being taught by one of these women in particular based

on a comment she made. She thought that it would be difficult for me to transition from being a counselor to an administrator because "counselors tend to be too soft and caring and unable to make tough decisions." I disagreed with her and told her that my skills as a counselor enabled me to learn how to be an effective communicator with students, teachers, parents, and administrators.

Fortunately, there were two professors from my specialist program that I bonded with and who have become my mentors over the past few years. Nearing the end of my educational specialist, Dr. Larry DiChiara and Dr. Iris Saltiel, encouraged me to continue my education and pursue my doctorate in educational leadership and administration. I applied and was excited to be accepted in the doctoral program at Southern University. What I hadn't realized was that the doctoral cohort experience would bring an accumulation of feelings of friendship, joy, being challenged, frustration, and, most of all, cause me to see the extent of my unawareness and how I perpetuated gender biases and inequities.

During one of our classes in the first semester, our professor gave us an instrument that we completed individually to assess our personality type and style of communication. Molly and I were the only two women whose style of communication patterns were similar to the majority of the men. I remember feeling quite proud of myself that I was in the same group as the men in terms of personality and communication style. That moment

reinforced that all of my hard work to assimilate myself with men in positions of power was now a reality. That activity was one of our first experiences where members in our cohort learned about each other and shared common bonds. At that point, I purposefully leaned toward working with the people who shared my style of communication and personality. Now that I think about it, it was quite easy and comfortable working with Molly and many of the men. I remember not making the effort to learn how to work as well with other members in our group, and at times I felt irritated when I was required to work with a group that was made up with a majority of women. I automatically assumed they would want to talk a lot and get off task rather than accomplish the task that was in front of us. I had to ask myself, Have I lost the ability to communicate with other women? Have a worked so hard at learning how to work for men, and wanting them to see me as a leader, that I have taken on their style of communication and leadership? At this very moment, I have to admit, as difficult as it is, that in the beginning of this program, I was willing to work hard to impress the men in our cohort with my leadership skills and abilities because they were the ones who I believed had larger networks and who would make better references on my resume. Unfortunately, my own assumptions have been sexist. I wasn't even aware of those assumptions until a later time. After editing my narrative many times, I now know that I must acknowledge the ugly truth. As the saying goes, one cannot change what

you do not acknowledge. At the risk of being an open book and sharing thoughts that I question today, I aim to grow beyond my previous erroneous assumptions and work toward building equity and condemn my own divisive past behaviors.

The cohort was separated into two groups during the first semester. It wasn't until the second semester that these two groups came together to form one cohort. Eventually, we took the same classes and slowly started to mingle with one another. This is important to note because by the end of the first semester, people in each group had settled into different roles as separate groups within the same cohort. We began to experience small amounts of strife when our two groups were combined as one. We were silently trying to re-configure our roles and discover the strengths and weaknesses in people from the "other side." As I reflect on the two groups becoming one, I recognize that the majority of the men didn't appear to have the same need or desire to be leaders within the cohort as did several of the women. As a matter of fact, in several of the leading roles in our professional learning community, the men were asked by the women to take lead roles rather than the men vying for these positions. It would only be an assumption on my part if I were to speculate why that is. I don't think the men found it as difficult to blend the two groups as the women did.

Many of the group assignments required in-depth reading, research, and requesting information from specialists. There was a lot of work to do and little time to do it. My first group assignment

was working with two men, which was very successful. In comparison, when I had to work with a larger group with several women, I found myself feeling frustrated. There was a great amount of conflict among the women. The only woman I was completely comfortable working with, and wanted to work with every chance I could, was Molly. We didn't compete with each other, but instead, we enriched and motivated one another to continue to reach greater heights.

As the program has progressed, I see a difference between the level of relationships that women have formed with each other and those that the men have formed with one another and with the women. The men tend not to seek relationships as much as they have sought confirmation from the women that they are on the right track with their assignments. I'm not sure if the men feel like they don't need emotional support from others in the cohort or maybe they prefer support from their friends and families outside of the cohort. As a woman, I find it valuable to have a close personal friend and a professor that will mentor me from within the cohort so I can talk about experiences that they are familiar with and collaborate to gain new perspectives. I like receiving critical feedback from sources that I trust; I count on these experiences for my own personal and professional growth.

It has been extremely beneficial for me to be able to collaborate with other strong women as I go through the doctoral program. I can laugh, cry, vent, or seek wisdom and encouragement from Molly and Lisa. Had it not been for my participation in a cohort, I probably would have dropped out of the program when I had back surgery. I'm ecstatic to say that Molly rallied behind me and encouraged me to utilize Skype (online voice communication technology) to attend classes while I was recovering from surgery. The familial community that the cohort provided was not only evident among the students but with my professors as well. They readily accepted Molly's offer to use this technology that allowed me to continue to participate in the program for the two months I was recovering.

The other professor that has forever changed my life is a male professor who is a major proponent for social justice. His class subject matter often slaps a student in the face; because of the topics and conversations in his class, students are impelled to question their assumptions and reframe their thoughts and ideas as their ignorance about a topic or issue slowly diminishes. He makes a student feel empowered to the point where he or she wants to empower others. There was comfort in the fact that he would not allow someone to take over the conversation and start degrading others when we talked about sensitive and emotional topics such as gender and race. He made it safe to talk about topics that were not normally discussed, especially in the south.

One of the most defining moments of accepting my femininity as a strength rather than a weakness was the night that this male professor facilitated a discussion with our class regarding the two articles we were assigned to read titled *Ella Flagg Young:*

Pioneer of Democratic School Administration (Webb & McCarthy, 1998) and *Sexism, Silence, and Solutions: Women Superintendents Speak Up and Speak Out* (Skrla, Reyes et al., 2000). It was not until this class that I had ever heard of Ella Flagg Young. That in itself is revealing of the educational leadership preparation programs that I graduated from. Gender issues had never been a topic of discussion in any of my educational leadership programs until this experience in my doctoral program. As I was reading these articles, I began to question myself and how my own behavior tended to be sexist and perpetuate gender inequity against my own gender.

I believed to the depth of my core that I would never be accepted as an educational leader if I showed my feminine side and that the leaders who hired administrators didn't want to see the feminine side. I didn't know how to act in order to advance as a leader in education. I began to wonder if other women in our cohort had these same lived experiences. This helped me see women and men in our cohort through a whole new lens. I became more open and willing to work with other women.

In a research article about women superintendents, Tannen (1994) (see Skrla et al., 2000) talked about feeling the double bind—the impossibility of being seen as assertive as a leader while also maintaining an appropriately feminine demeanor (p. 60). Emma was one of the women superintendents in the article reflecting on that quote. My eyes began to tear up as I continued to read Emma's story. I was overridden with guilt because I was unaware until

that very moment that I had been sexist against women myself. I had become so comfortable over many years of working for men that their assertiveness was normal but when negative comments were made about women with the same level of assertiveness, I did not take a stand and sometimes I even chimed in with my own negative remarks. Seeing assertive women was not the norm for me. Growing up in the south, girls are taught to act like a lady by showing respect. If men acted irrational then they were having a bad day. I was overwhelmed with sadness when I realized that I was unaware of my own silence and sexism. When I read those two articles, the flood gates opened with feelings of sadness as I realized that I had been trapped in my own assumptions and misunderstandings of women leaders. It was an awakening for me that evening in class when my professor facilitated talks of women and leadership. That was so powerful that I could barely discuss the topic in class without having a lump in my throat or tears silently rolling down my cheek. I realized that being assertive does not mean that I had to lose my femininity, but that my femininity was what made me be able to be assertive and nurturing at the same time. I began to take notice of things that I was never aware of before now.

I have a great amount of respect for my cohort members and the insight that each member brings to our discussions. After spending a year together, the one negative aspect of the cohort is having to work with the same group of people over a period of time who don't take the program seriously

and who are not prepared for group work or don't contribute to discussions because of their unpreparedness. On the other hand, the benefit of spending a year with my cohort is that there are people who are very reliable, dependable, and supportive of others and that aspect of the program makes it more familial. We may not always agree and we may have conflicts just as many families do but the underlying factor that helps overcome conflict are the professors. When professors are willing to address tough and controversial issues and provide a safe environment where challenging discussions are welcomed, we are afforded the opportunity to grow by reframing our former biases and assumptions.

Lisa's Story

While I was brought up in more positivist ways of knowing, I fully believe in the value of learning from multiple perspectives and in the reality that no one perspective is "the truth." As a researcher, I am striving to extend my capacities beyond quantitative inquiry, as I agree with Bernstein's (1993) claim (as cited in Young & Lopez, 2008) that researchers have an obligation to understand and use multiple frameworks in their research. With that acknowledgement, I begin my story.

I remember clearly standing in the grocery store looking at the magazines on the rack and picking up a *Ms. Magazine* (Fierst, 1988). I was not a popular magazine reader, but the cover image of a young mother and baby caught my attention, as I was a young mother with a six month old daughter. I

was curious about how *Ms. Magazine* would address motherhood. To this day, the magazine was one of very few I ever purchased in the grocery line. Today, just over twenty years later, I recall this memory as a critical event in my life. In that magazine, a story that featured Sandra Day O'Connor and other professional women left me with a powerful message.

At the time, I was struggling to understand who I was and who I wanted to be. I had grown up in East Coast suburbia with my mother, father, and two younger brothers. In many respects, I had what some would call an ideal childhood; I had few significant struggles growing up. My family was generally happy. I was loved. I spent my summers playing outside in the woods behind our home. I was very much a tom-boy, rejecting much of what seemed traditionally feminine. For me, the seventies were filled with exciting possibility. I was very aware of my mother's story. She had given up college to marry my father and then she stayed home to raise us, their three children. I did not see myself following her path. My developing understanding of the women's movement meant that I would have the opportunity to do "much more" with my life. I grew up expecting more of myself. I believed my parents expected and hoped for more for me. My mantra through high school was, "I am not getting married. If I do end up getting married, I will be in my thirties or older. I am not having children."

One week after I turned twenty I married my best friend. We chose our wedding date because I refused to be nineteen on my wedding day, although

that meant we had just time enough for a short honeymoon prior to the start of my junior year of college. Two years later, pregnant, I graduated from college, on time with my high school class cohort. I believe that I was the first in my high school class to have children. I was certainly the first in my close network of friends. Somehow my high school mantra became a distant memory in the thrill of finding the love of my life and beginning a family together.

The challenge for me came when I followed my deeply intuitive inclination to give up graduate school and stay home full time with our eight-month old daughter. On the deepest level, I was following my heart. On another level, this decision caused an identity crisis that challenged me to my core. Who was I? Was I giving up myself, my identity, for my family? Why did only women have to face these questions? Was I becoming that which I said I never would? It was a deeply painful period in my life. The choices I had did not feel freeing, they felt terribly stressful. The expectations I had for my life were nothing like the reality I was facing as a mother and daycare provider for three other young children.

To this day, I look back with deep gratitude to that *Ms. Magazine* article that helped me frame my understanding of my life as a woman in new terms. The message that stuck with me was that I could have it all, just maybe not all at once. That one idea and the women's supporting stories provided a new glimmer of peace and sparked a still emerging sense of womanhood less bound by formal expectations. I could celebrate the choices I had and make the choices that resonated with me with less concern about the opposing forces of traditional motherhood versus professional womanhood.

Relatively quickly I developed a deepening sense of peace about following my intuition and living the life that felt right to me. I thought little about my gender other than other than I knew I should embrace the fact that I felt enormous gratitude to the women before me who had strived for the choices I now had. I proudly parented full-time for seven years before re-entering the workforce as a first-year high school biology teacher. Parenting in my early twenties made me a more confident new teacher; I was not in the least intimidated by teenagers, although many of them towered over me. I was easily mistaken for another high school student rather than a new teacher. However, I found my rhythm quickly and loved the work.

Through most of my years as a teacher in public middle and high schools and an independent high school, I rarely recall thinking about my gender. I had grown quite comfortable with the choices I had made and I felt a deep respect for the variety of choices other women made. To me, the blessing of the women's movement was in the freedom to choose. I chose many traditional roles at home. I loved baking, knitting, sewing, and other crafts. I found dealing with car issues like flat tires and trips to the mechanics ridiculously unnerving. So much so, that, to this day, it is not unusual for my daughters to point out the traditional division of labor between me and my husband. And yet, when it came time to choose whether or not to

move one year ahead of my family so that I could join a doctoral program in educational leadership, it was a relatively easy decision. I had learned to accept the leadings of intuitive decisions. Although it certainly was not a traditional path for a mother of two teenage daughters to follow, I did so with confidence that our family could make it work and we did. Again, I paid little conscious attention to my gender, in many ways simply reaping the privilege that others worked to provide.

During the four years of my doctoral program, I was surrounded by women more curious than me about gender and leadership issues. The issues related to gender just did not grab my attention or my energy. I had worked for and with many men whom I admired and respected. I was married to a most wonderful man who I only very rarely wished to verbally bash with my girlfriends. The men in my life had most often treated me as a respected friend and colleague. Thus, it was with great surprise and significant discomfort that I spent my first year as an assistant professor realizing that my gender may be an unavoidable liability in my new job. Gender alone was not the liability. I believe the intersection of my Northeastern U.S. cultural upbringing, my youthful appearance, along with my gender served as a potential liability in the very new-to-me Deep South U.S. culture. I was startled to find myself wondering if I could or would gain credibility. I did not feel the familiar level of respect from many of the men and women around me, especially some of my students. In many respects, I am still living through these new realizations and discoveries. I have a new curiosity in understanding gender dynamics and leadership. I realize now that in my relative privilege, I have been naïve and thus, I have much to learn.

This next section of my story, describing and critically examining my experience in my present job, is most challenging. I am confronted with a myriad of questions and concerns about what to voice and what to silence. I find my desire to be both honestly transparent and respectfully considerate of others' perceptions/experience in conflict. I realize that although I have thought of myself as willing and capable of both sharing and receiving constructive criticism, this territory of exploring gender dynamics within our educational leadership program quite difficult. As a pre-tenured assistant professor striving to work collaboratively among team and department members that I do not yet know well, I am very aware that I feel more silenced than ever before in my experience. How do we write about our experience with openness and honesty while at the same time forge positive working relationships within a higher educational structure that may not reward pre-tenured faculty for being open and sparking uncomfortable conversations? I fear speaking freely, both because I recognize how far easier it is to criticize others before examining ourselves and because I absolutely wish no harm to my colleagues or my students. And yet, staying silent will prevent the public examination of the systems and structures perpetuating this very fear and silence. Out of deep respect for my colleagues and students,

I will strive to tell this section of my story without critique of others, recognizing that what I have the power to know and change is quite limited to my own practice. As I reflect on my first year as an assistant professor, I see that my naiveté regarding gender related issues allowed me to fall into and perpetuate dynamics that need critical examination. I need to take responsibility for the role I play in perpetuating such structures so that my learning, teaching, and leading might improve. The patterns and dynamics we perpetuate, support, and facilitate as professors are likely to show up unaddressed in our students' experience and then again in their professional experiences (Rusch, 2004).

Early on in my first year, I forged an immediate alliance and friendship with another new professor in our educational leadership program. He was hired as an associate professor with an impressive record of scholarship and experience in multiple educational leadership programs. I looked to him for advice, guidance, and reassurance as we worked together to learn a new organizational and regional culture. We developed a high level of trust that allowed us to discuss and explore the meaning we made of the events we experienced in meetings and classes. I felt safe speaking freely and yet, now a year later, I believe I may have hidden from the challenges of forging strong relationships with everyone on my team. I was willing to hide behind a more experienced, knowledgeable male colleague primarily because of my own insecurities and uncertainty. How much of this dynamic was influenced by our

genders? What problems on our team were reinforced by my own cautious and limited engagement with everyone on the team?

I am a practitioner at heart and an emerging scholar. As I watched a divide deepen between scholars and practitioners on our team, I struggled to know how to bridge it. I knew that I was perceived on the scholar side of the divide, as I had aligned closely with a strong scholar on our team. However, I remained uncomfortable. I watched my colleague make writing his top priority. He kept his door closed most often. I believed it was important for me to keep my door open; to symbolically and literally keep myself available to team members and department colleagues. When I was asked to take on administrative tasks, I made completing them a priority, as it seemed that it was one way to try and forge more positive working relationships. I noticed that my male colleague did not seem to be asked to take on administrative tasks. Should my door be closed? Would closing my door protect me or make me a target? I could not bring myself to close my door. Not only was my office door open, my email door was always open. I rarely missed responding to a colleague or student within a few hours or less. While I know I must learn some different strategies for remaining responsive *and* productive, I see responsiveness as an expression of care.

In the second semester of my first year, I had the opportunity to teach a master's level class. Prior to this semester, the cohort had been together for two full-time semesters. Their class had a strong presence that reflected

what I, as new to the Deep South, would describe as a "good ol' boy" culture. There was a core group of male students who dominated the group. Immediately, I felt very out of place and uncertain in this class. For the first time ever, I lacked confidence in the classroom. I was terribly nervous during class. I was baffled and disturbed by my discomfort. I perceived actions by the male students (unpreparedness, uncooperativeness, and unfriendliness) as challenges to my authority. I responded defensively and perpetuated an unstated conflict and tension within the class.

A few students, silent during class, sent me emails of support. I certainly welcomed their letters of support; yet, the show of silent support, in my mind at the time, justified asserting my own legitimacy and power rather than seizing the opportunity to confront some difficult conversations about culture and gender. My own lack of awareness and understanding of gender dynamics perpetuated silence and power struggles over productive examination and challenges to traditional patterns. I claimed my power and authority through tight accountability for preparedness, even higher expectations for quality of work, and much less positive relationship building than I typically preferred.

I remained defensive through most of the course. At midterm, I invited anonymous course evaluations and while some of them were positive, many of them were negative and one, in particular, expressed deep anger. I decided to take a risk and share all of the evaluations with the class. I wanted

them to know that I was willing to take them seriously and address them. We broke some of the ice that night—we acknowledged that some of our discomfort related to cultural background differences. I emphasized my desire to learn and understand the South and enlisted their help. I did not push into more challenging discussions of gender. My initial response to discomfort actually perpetuated traditional patterns. By the end of the semester, we found a more positive working relationship, although we never confronted the more challenging questions. I "safely" and unconsciously avoided confronting these more challenging questions related to culture and gender in the next semester's course with the same group by structuring the course in a very traditional format. At the time, I felt like the class wanted and needed this more traditional lecture format and that I had a responsibility to respond flexibly to their learning needs. In hindsight, we all simply stepped away from engaging conversations about gender, culture, power, legitimacy, and respect.

Within the doctoral cohort, for which I taught both the first and second semester of my first year, I was fairly oblivious to gender dynamics. The challenges I felt in the class just described did not relate to my experience with the doctoral students. Towards the end of my second semester, two students—Christy and Molly—approached me and asked me to collaborate with them on a paper for presentation. I was honored by their request and eagerly met them to discuss ideas. As I listened, I heard their interest

in the gender dynamics of our cohort emerge as a topic to pursue. I knew I would have much to learn through this opportunity. As I reflect on the doctoral cohort, I can now see patterns that did not stand out to me during the last year. For the students, their cohort experience began in two separate sections due purely to scheduling issues for the department. One section had eleven students, five women and six men, and the other section had seven members, five women and two men. In both sections, women emerged as the strongest students and clear leaders of each group. I did not see this as a gendered issue. Until my conversations with Christy and Molly later in the second semester, I did not realize the burden these women had been carrying in the class. Rather, I accepted at face value their strength, intelligence, and assertiveness. I did not intentionally spark conversations related to gender; I missed critical opportunities for deepening our learning that I do not miss today. I am curious to know how the men saw their roles in the cohort experience.

Jeff's Story

I could choose from among several critical incidents to begin a personal narrative about gender and educational leadership, but one in particular comes to mind. A few years ago at a conference, I attended a session about gender and educational leadership expecting to see the usual four or five research presentations. Although I have a natural curiosity about most social/political/cultural phenomena, gender has never been a

core part of my research agenda. The main reason I was there was to learn and to support one of my doctoral students who was about to begin a study on rural women superintendents. When we entered the room, about twenty women were seated in chairs arranged in a circle facing each other—this was a "conversation" session rather than a presentation of research. I was the only man in the room.

I knew several women in the room, but I hesitated at the door and considered a hasty retreat. I wasn't sure that I was welcome. I wasn't sure my voice or perspective was valued here or if by being there I might either symbolically—or actually—represent some form of oppression in a space that should be safe and secure. As I paused, my eyes met a women I had known for several years—one of the leading critical feminists in the field of educational leadership. I said, "Should I go…or?" To which she responded, "don't be ridiculous. Come over and sit here, next to me." I made it over and sat down. For most of the session I was silent. The room was mainly filled with women whom I knew only as casual acquaintances, and they engaged in a wide-ranging discussion about gender politics of K-12 schools and institutions of higher education, gendered oppression in society, and touched on several more specific topics such as abortion, sexuality and queer rights, how women are often judged by appearance rather than merit, and inequity in pay between women and men at all levels of education. At a certain point, the conversation turned to the topic of the history of the field of

educational administration, and how a meeting such as the one we were having would have been impossible as recently as 20 years ago because there were so few women professors of educational administration until recently. Moreover, one participant noted that even with the influx of women in the educational administration professorate, a relatively paltry number were actually in leadership positions in the field. It was right then that another woman I knew, seated across the circle from me looked me in the eye and asked, "Jeff, who have been the leaders of the schools and university organizations in which you've worked?"

I thought for a moment and realized that nearly all of the leaders I worked for since I decided to enter education had been women. I replied, "Well, the principal who hired me was a woman, my dissertation advisor was a woman, the center where I worked as a graduate student was run by a woman, and both of the deans who hired me to university faculty positions were women. Honestly, I've spent much more time in education following women leaders than men. For what it's worth, my experience has been that many of the men I've worked for were unethical leaders and the women have been far superior in almost every way." There was a brief silence after I spoke, then the woman who had invited me to sit with her commented, "that's an incredible sign of the times. It really would have been impossible for a White man to have that experience and attitude just a decade ago. It doesn't necessarily mean that there has been an ethnographic shift in power, but your comments

certainly show a demographic shift." She went on to explain that just because there were more women in higher education leadership positions, her own experience was that an oppressive culture hostile to women was alive, well, and even celebrated in the halls of the Ivory Tower and the Little Red Schoolhouse alike.

Over the coming months, while working with the doctoral student who attended that session with me, I learned a great deal more about gender and educational leadership than I had previously known. Reading the works of scholars like Charol Shakeshaft, Catherine Marshall, Cryss Brunner, Marilyn Tallerico, Michelle Young, Jackie Blount, Margaret Grogan, Norma Mertz, Diana Pounder, Carolyn Riehl, and Linda Skrla, whom I had only briefly encountered as a graduate student, helped me begin to understand the breadth and depth of gendered inequity, P-20. It also gave me a greater appreciation for what my colleague had explained in that earlier session when she suggested that it was insufficient to take heart in the increased number of women administrators when a hegemonic culture that systematically and ubiquitously denies women equality of access and treatment in educational institutions still exists.

While I agreed that my experience was perhaps atypical, I saw it was important that I interrogated my assumptions about the women who had lead the organizations in which I worked. Upon further reflection, I noted that while each had been a strong and capable leader in our personal interactions (one in particular I am still

convinced was the best educational leader I have seen), it was actually difficult to claim that these women were able to find the success and happiness that their work and acumen merited. Each woman was ultimately either forced out of her position or was uncomfortable, under-appreciated, or oppressed in their institutions. As many of the women in the previous paragraph have noted, this oppression takes place not only in charts that depict longitudinal trends in the gender of who holds leadership positions in education, but is a pervasive and insidious form of oppression manifest in small interpersonal exchanges, intentional and unintentional policies, and in connection to a larger society that perpetuates gendered inequity.

The gender politics of educational leadership preparation program faculty. As I write this, I have been a professor of educational administration for six years, and I have worked in three universities during that time. I only worked at the first for a year, but a clear and hostile sexist attitude was firmly entrenched in the leadership of the educational administration program (see Brooks & Tooms, 2008 for a more detailed explanation). My subsequent four-year appointment was in a program where gender (and race) was the elephant in the room. In fact, I have noted that insisting in a difference-blind approach to educational leadership preparation seems to be *de rigueur* in the programs I have worked. Professors willing to insist that gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, and other differences are more commonly ignored rather than

acknowledged. One program coordinator who comes to mind used to always characterize such differences through deficit language as "social problems" and dismissed addressing these "issues" as beyond the scope of the program. Yet these issues, gender in particular, seemed evident in my most recent faculty appointment.

The Educational Leadership Preparation Program (ELLP) at the Southern University was split into a master's program and doctoral program. The coordinator of each program was a woman with extensive practitioner experience, but both were relatively less-accomplished researchers. As a whole, the faculty consisted of four untenured assistant professors (two women and two men), one clinical professor (a non-tenure seeking woman), and three tenured full professors (two women and a man) who were technically program members, but none of whom taught courses during the year I was there. Nonetheless, these three people, who were not generally united, were probably the most powerful cultural and policy influences on the group. Over the course of the year, there were symbolic attempts to craft vision and mission statements that might guide our work, but soon an obvious philosophical divide developed and widened between the research-focused and practitioner-focused members of the faculty. Such rifts among educational leadership faculty are common and something teams must commonly work through, but what was more alarming was the gendered oppression that also ran through the group. One of the full professors

engaged in systematic and ongoing intimidation, condescension, and outright career abuse of female faculty by making numerous sexist remarks, both to these women themselves and to male faculty. On several occasions, until I made it clear I was offended by such comments, this professor explained to me whom he felt attractive on the faculty and among our students, what was women's and men's work, and how I should "look out" for women who are always "out to get" male faculty. Moreover, the untenured women in the program were given inordinately high administrative and service workloads, and more than one female faculty member mentioned to me that they felt as though they were treated as secretaries. I observed that many administrative functions that were his responsibility, or even just a team responsibility, were delegated to women. At our first faculty meeting, when we needed to decide who would take meeting minutes, one male faculty member openly said he wouldn't do it because he never had—all his secretaries had done it for him over the years. He ended this comment by raising an eyebrow and asking if "one of you ladies" would take notes. This elicited a hearty laugh from other male faculty and a pit in my stomach, but I have to admit that as an untenured faculty member myself I wasn't sure how to respond other than by volunteering to take the minutes at that meeting.

The gender politics of educational leadership preparation program: observations of a cohort. I taught in both the master's and doctoral ELPP cohorts at Southern University. I taught only one course in the master's cohort, and the social dynamics of the group had a pronounced "good 'ol boys" feel to it. Picking up on this fifteen minutes into the first class session, I employed countless cooperative learning practices designed to unsettle these dynamics and make sure that women were in the lead and that the men who set this tone were routinely separated during activities and projects. This seemed to work well, but subsequent conferences with fellow faculty and students from that cohort lead me to believe that my efforts likely had little lasting effect. However, I taught several courses in the doctoral cohort, and here the dynamics were somewhat different.

The gender dynamics of the ELPP doctoral cohort were to a large extent shaped by cultural forces of the Old South, where the university was located. In hindsight, I feel that values such as a longstanding belief in traditional and strictly delineated gender roles exerted a significant influence on classroom activities, interactions, topics selection for dissertations, tensions around work/life balance, and career aspirations. Although in my estimation, the women in the cohort were, by and large, superior to men in terms of scholarly potential, disposition toward reflective practice, work ethic, and attitude toward learning, many commonly professed a lack of confidence in their ability or a resignation that they were the victim of gendered political forces they would never be able to overcome. There was much talk of how women needed to act more masculine, avoid

discussing anything as gendered, and not "show up" their male counterparts and "superiors" to be successful. The lessons of this hidden curriculum were taught and reinforced subtlety, in offhand comments by men in the cohort, who often joked about how the women were seen as overachievers when they produced high-level work. On more than one occasion, I heard a man ask a woman if she "had a life at home" when she produced a high-quality paper or presentation. They made no such comments to other men and instead commonly suggested high-level work produced by men was the result of their being smart. As with the master's cohort, I tried to disrupt these gendered discourses, but with this group, filled with extremely talented and devoted women, a different dynamic emerged. While the master's cohort settled into a traditional gendered Old South dynamic, several women in the doctoral cohort openly supported and encouraged each other—*because* they were women—and they recognized that some of them did not receive important forms of support in the districts where they worked or from their families.

Discussion

Individual Lessons Learned

Molly. Throughout this research process, I've learned several lessons. Most prominent is the extent to which inequity exists between men and women in educational leadership positions and preparation programs. Also important is how often unintentional actions and patterns of behaviors actually encourage the

inequality. Whether individuals choose to remain silent, or are truly unaware of inequities, not taking a stand will further perpetuate sexism throughout the field of education. Although aware of the disparity that exists between men and women in educational leadership, it was not until this project that I examined my own beliefs and assumptions. Having now developed a watchful eye, I'm at the point where I'm able to identify areas of concern and take a stand against inequities. Yet, I'm realistic in knowing that I must choose battles carefully, so as not to jeopardize my position or future marketability, as the topic appears to be the elephant in the room. My hope is that individuals within the cohort, as well as educational leadership professors, get to the point where we can have those difficult conversations, discussing our experiences within the program and the dynamics among group members. As we have completed our first year of course work, cohort members are beginning to separate from one another, taking elective courses according to our individual needs. While it's not likely that any large group discussion will impact members of our cohort, perhaps this journey can bring forth lessons learned that would benefit subsequent cohorts. A faculty member will hopefully provide that supportive environment necessary, set time aside, and discuss group dynamics from the start, ironing out any problems or issues along the way—an opportunity we weren't afforded.

Working through this process, I've also begun to think more about my current role as a high school

administrator and my need to balance my Type A tendencies with a certain level of femininity. I don't want to lose myself in the role I'm fulfilling by embracing male qualities and traits "expected" of an effective administrator. I aspire to be at a place where I'm comfortable enough with my femininity, yet able to maintain a level of assertiveness without feeling the need to be over aggressive. While I'm not yet at that point, I'm fully aware and working towards becoming a powerful feminine leader in the field of education.

Christy. Throughout this research project, I began to examine my own belief system and initiate uncomfortable conversations with others in the cohort as well as with my female coworkers, using a more empowered language. Now, rather than putting forth a great amount of effort trying to assimilate myself with men who are leaders in my organization and cohort, I now prefer to ask tough questions of others and myself. There have been times in these conversations where I have felt like the Lone Ranger and second guessed my moments of bravery. I'm on the brink of discovering how to become a tempered radical and advocate for women in educational leadership. My challenge is to find the level of discomfort where I am pressing for truth, while at the same time I am not sacrificing my career in the K-12 setting. I'm beginning my new journey by talking about gender issues with people I already have solid relationships with, both men and women.

There have been two separate occasions where I brought up gender in relation to leadership in a class setting.

Both times I could feel the tension increase, and neither attempt created meaningful conversation. I don't believe that the cohort as a whole is ready to have these types of conversations without facilitation by a professor. I am trying to figure out how to initiate these types of talks where men do not feel guilty and women are willing to talk freely in order for us to have meaningful dialogue. The power of silence still looms over the cohort and had it not been for one of my professors and this research project, I too may have continued to live in a bubble of unawareness, continuing to contribute to silence and sexism. The more aware I become, the more my silence lessens. Could this possibly be the answer for increasing the number of women hired for high-powered positions in education—extending talks of equity in leadership within leadership preparation programs? If I am a woman and I was unaware, how much more are men, the majority of our educational leaders and school board members, unaware of the inequities between men and women in positions of power and leadership in education?

Lisa. As I entered this project, I knew I would have much to learn. Looking back over our experience I am struck by a few key lessons. Personally, I am far more aware than I ever have been of the dynamics going on within my classes and on my team. I am more critical of the role I play in perpetuating undesired dynamics. I am more committed to making sure that I contribute positively to breaking the patterns that, if left unseen and

uncontested, will continue to operate within our team, cohorts, and schools.

We unintentionally perpetuate the patterns and inequities in our educational leadership programs when we do not intentionally create the space for challenging conversations either on our team or in our classes. I recently embraced such an opportunity in one of my classes (I would have completely missed the opportunity prior to working on this project) and found that many of the students were very willing to engage the conversation about gender and leadership. As the professor, I held the power to lead with inquiry and follow their comments with genuine probing questions. My greatest challenge was maintaining my own composure when the majority of men and women in the class agreed that at least one male administrator was critical for the high school level. The only question I could think to ask was whether a woman was also critical for the administrative team. The response was a delayed no. This led into quite a long discussion about our deeply held beliefs and assumptions related to power, authority, and gender. By the end, one of the men in the group shared how he often felt burdened by others' assumptions that he would be the disciplinarian and command order primarily because of his stature and gender. We could feel some major shifts taking place in the room. Women realized that they may just as readily contribute to the perception that women are less effective leaders by turning automatically to men for enforcing discipline. Facilitating these conversations is far more challenging

than avoiding, ignoring, or remaining oblivious. I eagerly embrace this challenge. Although, while I am eagerly embracing this challenge, my education has not prepared me for this work.

Jeff. The process of conducting this collaborative research has prompted me to reflect on who I am as a researcher and as a teacher. Being the only male member of our research team, one focused on gender dynamics, pushed me further on issues I have either been oblivious to, have suppressed, or even neglected. On a personal level, this experience urges me to think carefully about my relationships with women, as mediated through the social ties of collegiality and the teacher-student relationship.

It reminds me first that it is important to collaboratively build trusting relationships with people who endeavor to co-construct an educational experience for themselves and others. We must get to know our students and colleagues as people—as complex socio-political-cultural beings—in addition to knowing them as learners, students, or the person who sits across from us at faculty meetings. While we share a quite specific educational space, one that usually amounts to only a few hours a week, we are often oblivious to who that person is, what they have been through, what the environment communicates to them and where they are headed. Gender is not only a pertinent factor among many other factors (race, class, income, etc.), it is central to educational experiences in general and women's experiences in educational institutions in particular.

Second, classrooms are not always the safest place to learn about each other, and undergoing a reflective and interactive experience within this case, two students and a colleague helped me understand who they were and how gender shapes them on a much deeper level than I would have had we remained in traditional spaces. Much of my efforts as an instructor in higher education has centered on creating a safe place for people to explore ideas and perspectives in the classroom; this experience makes me wonder if I shouldn't be throwing out the classroom-centric focus altogether and intentionally getting us into different spaces and situations via more creative design of assignments and assessments.

Third, I was reminded that gender is a dynamic often suppressed in leadership discourse, and this is true both in the literature of our field and in the hallways of schools and universities. I realize that though I worked in a college of education filled with brilliant women in formal leadership positions, their leadership capacity was to some extent constrained by social, cultural, and political norms which were at times spoken and at others part of a "conspiracy of silence" (Blount, 1998) in which I have too often been a complicit conspirator by my silence. The good old boys club is still firmly entrenched in many places and I need to consider how my agency as a White male gives me the platform to be not only an *ally* to women, but an *advocate* in educational settings.

Fourth, while this experience has taught me many lessons, I realize that there is much work to do—both for me,

and for the field in general. In working on this project, I often dominated conversations, made decisions where it wasn't my place to do so and lead where I should have followed. This was to some extent a function of my being the senior scholar of the group. But this should not be a default position—and it is my responsibility to be more careful about the ways I enter and contribute to conversations, and the way I may be unintentionally creating a power-over-gender dynamic when I am attempting to be sensitive. This realization causes me to consider the ways I act with my faculty colleagues and how I ignore what might be important clues to gender dynamics by rationalization, by explaining away my own aggressive behavior as confidence, and by neglecting power relationships with my female colleagues and students. During my year at Southern University, I was told many times that my colleagues or students found me intimidating. As I went though this process, I was forced to note that most of the people who said this to me were women, and that while I wrap a cloak of sensitivity around my behavior I need to do much more work on the behavior itself if I am to help co-create not only safe spaces for discourse, but emancipatory spaces for education. The latter should be my goal, and the former is a path to that goal.

Collective Lessons Learned

The conclusions reached here are supported by research focusing on the inequities experienced by women in educational leadership (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Skrla et al., 2000; Trinidad & Normore, 2005) both in the

K-12 setting as well as higher education. Silence was an issue that we collectively lived and experienced as noted in our narratives (Hodgins, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Skrla et al., 2000). Some of our experiences within the cohort were similar to research that discussed how some women professors within higher education felt that they experienced an unequal division of labor, that the educational leadership experience was being explored only from the male perspective, and that they were unsure if and how they should address uncomfortable situations (Barnett et al., 2000; McPhail et al., 2008; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001).

Arguably the most important lesson emerging throughout the narratives is the need for cohort members and professors to engage in conversations about gender and its impact on educational leadership. Intentional conversations must take place between cohort members and professors and among faculty members in meetings and planning sessions. Another recommendation for future cohorts is to be aware of how scheduling practices can unintentionally create environments of hostility within a cohort. As students, we voiced our concerns about how splitting the cohort into two groups created an atmosphere of mistrust that was difficult to overcome when our two groups were finally combined into one cohort group. The benefit of being a cohort and creating a community of learners was lost for several semesters due to the split.
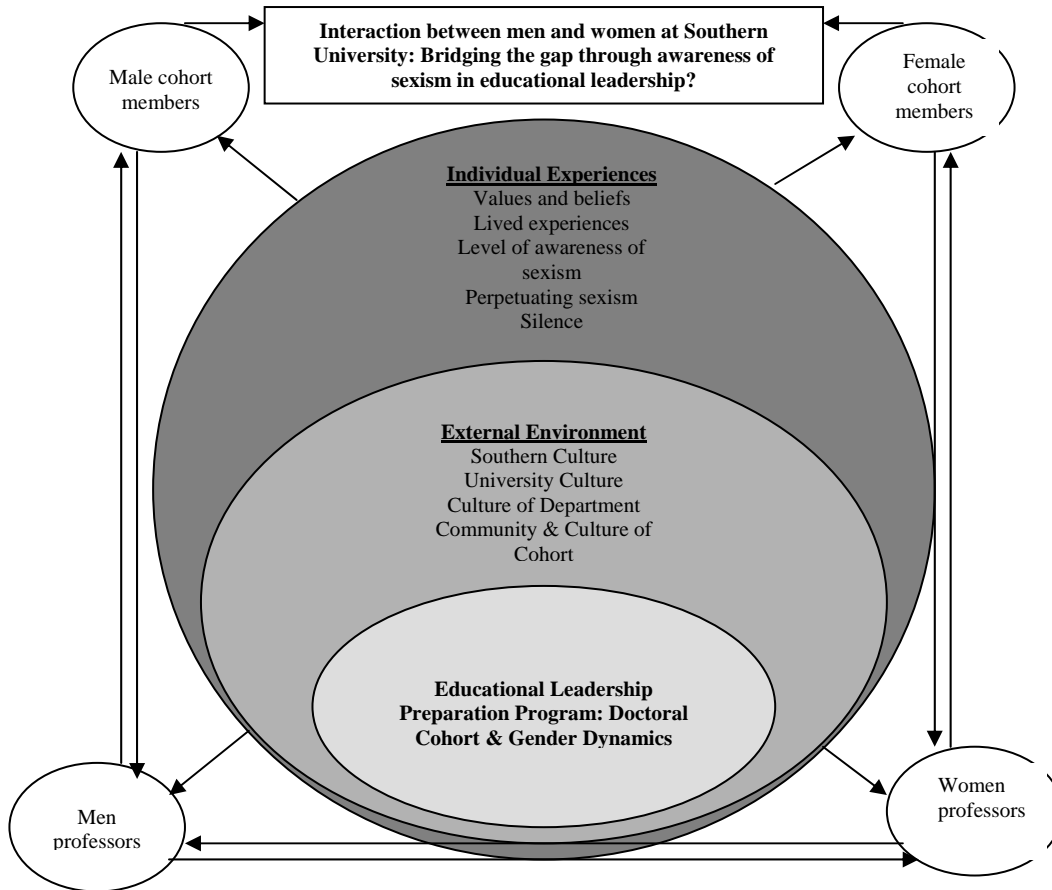
Professors who facilitate uncomfortable discussions provide an avenue for shining light on a topic some might consider to be taboo, allow women in the field of educational leadership to discuss their experiences in a supportive environment, and present men and women with information to increase their knowledge of and sensitivity to gender issues. The atmosphere created must be conducive to honest and reflective dialogue. Although avoidance might be the common practice—a more comfortable route for some (Hodgins, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Skrla et al., 2000)—the issue must be addressed to raise awareness among students and support continuous learning among university faculty (McPhail et al., 2008). Bringing these concerns to the forefront has resulted in conversation within the educational leadership team at Southern University. Our hope is that the dialogue continues as professors examine the dynamics of the cohort experience in order to implement necessary changes for future doctoral students

As a final note about collective lessons learned, we noticed that our individual life experiences and levels of awareness were in some ways very similar but also vastly different. From a student perspective, the majority of the professors have not facilitated discussions about gender inequities in leadership. Bridging the gap in leadership among men and women cohort members and faculty will require intentional talks. The systems model (see Figure 1) shows how each person's life experience is the input into our assumptions and conversations. The output demonstrates experiences and interactions between women and men

cohort members and faculty members. These interactions have the potential to increase awareness and decrease the perpetuation of inequity in educational leadership.

Interaction between men and women at Southern University: Bridging the gap through awareness of sexism in educational leadership?

Male cohort members

Female cohort members

Individual Experiences
Values and beliefs
Lived experiences
Level of awareness of sexism
Perpetuating sexism
Silence

External Environment
Southern Culture
University Culture
Culture of Department
Community & Culture of Cohort

Educational Leadership Preparation Program: Doctoral Cohort & Gender Dynamics

Men professors

Women professors

Figure 1. **Internal and external factors in relation to gender dynamics found in K-12 and higher education settings.**

Recommendations

Discussing collective lessons learned in the previous section created an opportunity for us to brainstorm together, from the perspectives of student and professor, to develop suggestions that educational leadership preparation programs can use to address the issue of gender differences and inequities within the cohort and in the profession of educational leadership. We have established that talks of gender differences and inequities in educational leadership are uncomfortable and do not occur without purposeful facilitation

by professors. Since there was only one class session devoted to this topic and further discussion beyond this class was not extended into other courses with other professors, the topic remains uncomfortable and the silence continues within our cohort.

A female superintendent, who was a guest speaker in one of our classes, never addressed gender issues until one of this article's authors posed a question to her during the question and answer session. Her response to gender inequities for women in power positions in leadership is worth mentioning here. Her recommendation was that teaching women how to deal with gender inequities in leadership is the job of the university and not the workplace. She gave the class an example of why it fails as on the job training; one superintendent's association offered a session just for women while the men went out and played golf! She stated that she has worked too hard to be seen as an equal with men and how separate workshops for women denigrate this progress. Although her state superintendent created workshops for women superintendents, it is not one that this woman superintendent seeks to be a part of. She seeks support from men and women, from those who are more experienced than her. She stated that a woman in a power position should not try to act like a man, but be a woman—a woman that is not wimpy.

In order for the university to fully prepare students for the realities of leadership in the K-12 setting and higher education as it relates to gender, the subject should be addressed more than once, and by more than one

professor. Intentional talks in faculty meetings at the university should include planning across the curriculum to create opportunities for students to address issues of inequity. The concept of using a diagram to facilitate discussions in the curriculum of educational leadership preparation programs creates an opportunity for students to discuss gender differences in an intellectual matter rather than through emotions only. A guided discussion with diagrams and concept maps may also help professors who are venturing into this topic for the first time a safe way to facilitate discussions that have the potential to be emotionally charged. It is also important to point out that as students and professors seek understanding and reframe their own assumptions individually, it is also happening at an institutional level and each person's own diagram is in constant motion as they learn new things. Their awareness grows and they figure out how to act in certain situations. Imagine, for example, if we asked people—students and faculty—to each map their experiences with gender by creating a systems model and had them present and discuss it so that other people had a better understanding of each other's experiences, values, and belief systems.

Cohort members are often unsure about how to bring up challenging issues, very much like professors in team meetings. We all have different comfort levels for dealing with uncomfortable conversations. Leaders of courses, teams, departments have the power to create the conditions for uncomfortable conversations. If the

space is not created, the difficult conversations definitely will not happen. Examining the gender dynamics within the doctoral cohort showed us that there were various responses to what is described as an unequal division of labor and the apparent focus on the male perspective in educational leadership. While a few cohort members chose to speak out, carefully choosing which situations to address, the vast majority remained silent. Some were unaware of the issue, some chose to ignore it, while others engaged in behaviors that perpetuated the situation, encouraging the belief that women were subordinate to men and would serve in a nurturing and supportive role in the group. Facilitated discussions regarding gender dynamics and behaviors within the cohort may help create a community of learners who do not set themselves up to perpetuate unintentional sexist behaviors that have been seen within this cohort experience.

The cohort experience provides so much more than academic content, it also provides opportunities to network, learn how to surround yourself with people who have different strengths than your own, learn how to discuss sensitive issues, work through group tension, and learn how to create a sense of community with a diverse group of people who may have different value and belief systems. Educational leaders will benefit from using skills learned when negotiating through gender issues within the cohort. These skills will be useful as each person begins to apply them in their lives in higher education or K-12 settings as committees are formed, colleagues challenge one another, or when you are placed in a new setting with faculty members who are new to you as the leader. Professors should allow time to discuss gender issues, as well as other uncomfortable but necessary issues pertinent to educational leadership. To ignore the topic, or pretend it doesn't exist, would continue to perpetuate the very actions we're attempting to move away from.

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