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## Women in the Superintendency: A Study of Accumulative Disadvantage

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Introduction

Ella Flagg Young became the first woman superintendent of the Chicago schools in 1909 (Blount, 1998). Young's enthusiasm for women's school leadership reflected the palpable momentum among women activists at the time. After all, in a mere 50 years women had progressed from having few means of employment outside the home to dominating their new profession of teaching, accounting for around 70 percent of all teachers by 1900 (Blount, 1998).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, thousands of women succeeded in attaining school leadership positions (Blount, 1999). During this time school districts added formal bureaucratic structures and administrative layers, a trend that resulted in a proliferation of administrative positions. Women moved into positions, becoming lead teachers, teaching principals, supervisors, mid-level administrators, sometimes ultimately superintendents (Blount, 1998).

Women now make up around half the ranks from which the vast majority of superintendents are taken: central-office administrators and principals (Keller, 1999). In district central offices, 57 percent of the professionals are women as are 41 percent of principals (Keller, 1999).

Through the lens of the Salieri effect (Clark & Corcoran, 1986) and accumulative disadvantage, the purpose of the study is to describe and explain the under-representation of women in the superintendency despite their over-representation in the teaching profession. The following will be accomplished: (a) a description of the stories of women's lives and experiences that pertains to or describe a career in education administration; (b) an analysis of the stories these women tell through the lens of the Salieri effect and accumulative disadvantage; © other realities that may be revealed; (d) an assessment of the usefulness of the Salieri effect and accumulative disadvantage for explaining the phenomenon under review.

## Review of the Literature

The emergence of women teachers in the 1800s is remarkable considering long-standing Western traditions prohibiting women from this work. Women were to respect and rely on men's authority; thus they were thought to have little need of education, much less were they to provide it (Blount, 1998, p. 11).

Shakeshaft's (1989) look at the number of women in school administration since 1905 uncovers consistent male dominance in all positions except in the early days of the elementary school principalship. "Women have never been the majority of secondary principals or district superintendents" (Shakeshaft, 1989, p. 20).

Ella Flagg Young was appointed the first woman superintendent of the Chicago schools in 1909 and Ruth B. Love was appointed as the second woman superintendent of the Chicago public schools in 1980 (Shakeshaft, 1989). Seventy-five years transpired from one appointment to the next with little

change in the superintendent job prospects for women.

Tyack and Hansot (1982) note the educational system has undergone a great deal of change during the twentieth century, but the social characteristics of superintendents have not. Almost all superintendents have been “married white males, middle-aged, Protestant, upwardly mobile, from favored ethnic groups, native-born, and of rural origins” (p. 169). In 1991, 594 of the nation’s 10,683 K-12 superintendents were women (Bell & Chase, 1993). The male dominance of the occupation is striking because superintendents rise from the ranks of teachers, 70 percent of whom are women (Kaufman, 1989).

While the presence of women in the prestigious professions of medicine and law has increased slowly over the last twenty years, the superintendency has remained resistant to women’s integration, despite the fact that half the graduate students in programs of educational administration are now women, (Miller, 1986, p. 11).

The superintendency is a difficult job in today’s world of education. Various citizen groups seek input into educational policy making interest groups whose main concerns are not education. At the same time, the charter school movement, privatization of public education services and management, and state or mayoral takeovers of school board functions has also contributed to the erosion of superintendents’ authority and policy-making leadership (Glass, 1997).

## **Methodology**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Lorber (1983) discusses the interactive processes that keep women from positions of power and describes the “Salieri” phenomenon. She alludes to Peter Shaffer’s (1980) play, *Amadeus*, in which Mozart’s lack of social graces gives Salieri, the court composer and gatekeeper of musical patronage for the Emperor Joseph, the occasion to prevent Mozart’s extraordinary accomplishments from receiving recognition.

### **Procedures**

This study used qualitative methodology implementing an explanatory case study (Yin, 1984) using interviews to gather data collection. Interviews were conducted with ten successful women school principals or central office personnel with superintendent certification, but were not employed in the top-level education administrative job positions in public schools.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed throughout the data collection process. Interview questions for the women participants were based on the original theoretical proposition and research questions and were immediately transcribed and coded. Differences in repeating patterns were documented and analyzed. Data was coded for variants that could be defined as accumulative disadvantage. The lens of the Salieri effect was used to view the data and to reveal the influence of accumulative disadvantage on the lives of women who are in position for the job of the superintendency.

## **Findings**

## **Personal and professional characteristics**

Participants were administrators in a variety of school districts across the state of Oklahoma including small rural, suburban and larger urban schools in communities with populations ranging from 8,371 to 506,132 on the current census. The school districts these women were employed in had student enrollments that ranged from 1, 935 to 42, 302.

Four women were elementary principals at sites with grades PreK-5. Two women were elementary principals at sites with grades K-5. Two high school principals were interviewed at sites with grades 9-12. One middle school principal at her site with grades 6-8 and one assistant superintendent whose site included grades PreK-12 and adult education were also interviewed.

All participants had aspired to be a superintendent from 1 to 10 years. The ages of the participants ranged from 43-53 years of age. Nine women were Caucasian and one was African-American. Nine participants were married; one was divorced. Nine women had children and one did not. Table 1 presents these demographics.

Six participants possessed doctorates including four in education administration, one in student personnel, guidance and counseling and one in curriculum and instruction. Nine had completed postgraduate hours in educational administration while one had hours in school psychometry. A detailed description of participants' education information can be found in Table 2.

The years of administrative experience the respondents possessed ranged from 1 to 23 years. Additional administrative positions these respondents have held in the past included elementary, middle school, junior high and high school assistant principals, arts coordinator, special education director, education services coordinator, special services director, instruction specialist, curriculum specialist and curriculum director. Table 3 summarizes participants' career information.

All respondents had the career goal of obtaining the job of the superintendency if they could find the right "fit" with a school district that wanted them. One respondent would like either a superintendent's position or a position at the university level.

## **Demographics**

It was evident that disadvantages described throughout this data created an impact on the majority of participants' career choices. Disadvantages were discovered in all aspects of respondents' personal data such as age, race, marital status, if they had children, residence location, family and mentor support.

Respondents' age span was broad, but age was not identified as a detractor from what they wanted to achieve in life. However, older respondents revealed more of a reluctance to move their residence in order to possess the superintendency.

Marital status proved to be a disadvantage in individual circumstances when relocating could wreck havoc on the personal family life. Changing spouses' jobs, children's schools, friends and churches proved to be a disadvantage that would make a direct hit upon respondents' decisions about their careers. It was reported that children were an advantage to respondents for their love and support. Yet,

disadvantages were multiplied as most respondents had to constantly reevaluate their career goals until children were grown and left the home. The majority of respondents were disadvantaged by putting others first in their lives and putting their own careers on hold.

Half of the participants stated they did not want to relocate to become a superintendent. This resulted in limited career options. The disadvantages were present as respondents perceived the need to only look for the superintendency in a smaller town or large city, thereby creating fewer options in careers.

### **Career Trajectories**

Disadvantages were abundant and created by staying in the same job position for too long with no further advancement and looking for the perfect fit for a job. Due to the accumulated disadvantages, participants appeared to be reluctant and too guarded to find a superintendent's job position.

### **Education**

Respondents who obtained the same amount of education and degrees, but who were employed in elementary education communicated more disadvantages that accumulated as they tried to advance to higher levels or positions in central offices at the director or coordinator level, assistant principal or principalship. Participants discovered they were being "held back" for being accomplished without a change to progress and become successful as is explained in the Salieri effect (Clark & Corcoran, 1986).

### **District Demographics**

The lack of diversity in some schools proved to be a disadvantage due to the lack of experience respondents acquired working with different people. This disadvantage could also accumulate causing fewer opportunities of obtaining a superintendent's position in diverse areas of Oklahoma or other states with many cultures and races. Advantages were present for participants working with diverse people giving them a more marketable tool to use in schools where diversity abounds and is important to the community.

### **Perspectives about Careers in Education**

Respondents possessed a very high awareness of their particular requirements for their current jobs and what they should have or lack to obtain the superintendent's job position. Disadvantages could accumulate if aspirants acquire only the knowledge and skills for one particular district with an absence of awareness for what other districts require for their own superintendents.

### **Career Impacts-Accumulated Disadvantages and Advantages**

All respondents reported many different types of disadvantages, but many revealed similar experiences, doubts and fears about disadvantages that appear constantly in educational administration. Disadvantages such as not being listened to or taken seriously, limited opportunities for acceptance and advancement, gendered expectations from others, professional and organizational isolation and diminished quality in their personal lives had accumulated for respondents.

### **Strategies for Success**

All respondents believed women who aspire for the superintendency could succeed. Being diversified in several areas was reported as important and can prove competency in multiple areas.

Participants reported it was necessary to promote your success as proof of progress and achievement. This strategy could counteract the accumulation of some disadvantages in the course of careers. Finding the right school to become successful as superintendent is a strategy all participants explained would be an advantage.

### **Applicability of the Salieri Effect (1986) and Accumulative Disadvantage**

It is clear from the data that respondents reported a wide spectrum of accumulative disadvantages that appeared to support the Salieri effect (Clark & Cocoran, 1986) and the processes of accumulative disadvantage.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of this study provided insight into the under-representation of women in the superintendency despite their over-representation in the teaching profession. The narrative revealed the complexities of aspirants' lives and career paths that included their capabilities and their difficulties. The efficacy of the Salieri effect (Clark & Corcoran, 1986) and accumulative disadvantage as an effective tool for exploring the lack of women superintendents even though many women are certified and qualified to gain this top administrative level has been demonstrated. An important conclusion reveals the superintendency is a very strong position of power that is quite different from the ordinary lower-level administrative positions respondents have more commonly held in educational administration. Inequalities exist for superintendent certified and qualified women who are positioned and aspire for the superintendency, yet cannot achieve that objective due to the accumulation of disadvantages they have amassed over the years.

### **Implications**

This study also contributes to the knowledge base of educational administration by documenting the experiences of ten aspiring female superintendents. The information presented analyzes the passage of these individuals throughout their career path and documents the barriers present for females desiring the superintendents' job position.

An important inference of this study is that accumulated disadvantages were clearly found for the female aspiring superintendents interviewed. For those women in educational administration who plan to aspire and place themselves for the superintendency, this suggests that they should concern themselves with controlling the accumulation of disadvantages within their careers and strive to accumulate many advantages that will assist in balancing out the disadvantages.

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