Female Superintendents and the Effects of Mentoring Relationships

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Abstract

Women make up the majority of personnel in today's school systems yet few are employed in the highest position-superintendent. In one southern state, the State Department of Education (2009) reported 22 % of superintendents were women. Nationwide, the percentage is 24.1% (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). However, in comparison to the number of women who begin their careers in education, there is still a wide inequity between the percentages of those in the ranks and those in positions of superintendent (Katz, 2012). One of the reasons for the lack of women in upper level administration is the lack of mentoring, both formal and informal. Therefore, mentoring becomes an essential element in providing the guidance and support for women who aspire to be in a leadership position.

This study examined the effects of career and psychosocial mentoring functions on the careers of women superintendents currently serving in a southern state by exploring both informal and formal mentoring relationships and the way these relationships serve as effective tools on the position attained and career development. The results of this study showed that the career mentoring functions and psychosocial mentoring functions had a statistically significant impact on the careers of female superintendents. Findings from this research indicate that mentoring relationships have the potential for female administrators to make successful career advancement.

Keywords: Career mentoring, psychosocial mentoring, women in leadership

Introduction

Historically women in education are disproportionately represented at the highest positions of educational leadership, especially in comparison to the number who begin careers as teachers. Feistritzer (2011) reported eighty-four percent of the teaching work force were women, however, only twenty-four percent of superintendents were women (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2010). The number of female superintendents has been increasing over the years; 6.6 % in 1992, 13.2 % in 2000 (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000) and 24% in 2010 (Kowalski, et al, 2010). But, the nation's 14,000 district superintendents are still overwhelmingly white and male (Gewertz, 2006). In one rural southern state in 2009 of the 133 superintendents, 22% were women (State Department of Education, 2009). Grogan (2000) believed the need for increased knowledge and skills to help make sense of the immense amounts of information in the position of superintendent is an important concern of the 21ˢᵗ century leader. It is suggested that the US public school superintendents are understood to be a male's role, and women who inhabit this role will inevitably have difficulties caused by their femininity (Skrla, 2000). One of the reasons for the lack of women in upper level

administration is the lack of mentoring, formal or informal, for women to advance in careers or who are aspiring to the position of school superintendent. Hence, mentoring becomes essential in providing guidance and support for women who seek to become a superintendent.

Organizations are gradually acknowledging the benefits of mentoring relationships. More than 70% of Fortune 500 companies use mentoring to attract, develop and good retain employees (Kovnatska, 2014). It has also become increasingly popular in teacher education and school administrator development (Zerzan, Hess, Schur, Phillips, & Rigotti, 2009) and has been recognized as a significant component of faculty development (Tareef, 2013), career advancement, in addition to educational and personal development.

There are numerous studies on mentoring as an accepted and vital part of the developmental process in many professional fields (Moir, 2009; Smith, 2011). Still, there is limited research on the influences and benefits of mentoring relationships and the effects on the career development of newcomer administrative leaders, especially women (McDowell-Long, 2004; Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2006). As a result, mentoring relationships that provide both career development and psychosocial functions (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011) are particularly important for women in educational leadership to strive to top-level administrative positions in education.

The purpose of this study was to examine the career and psychosocial mentoring functions on the career development of women superintendents currently serving in a rural southern state. Explored in this study were both informal and formal mentoring relationships and in particular the way these relationships served as effective tools on position attainment and career development.

Mentoring

The art of mentoring is not a new concept. Its origin date back at least 3000 years to Greek mythology in Homer's Odyssey (Kovnatska, 2014). Mentor was a teacher and friend of King Odysseus who was entrusted to care for his son Telemachus while fighting in the Trojan War. During King Odysseus's absence, mentor educated and guided Telemachus. The mentor is frequently referred to as being a "wise and experienced man" (Steiner, 2014, p.702). However, the concept of mentoring involves more aspects than in Telemachus function. Today, mentoring is simply a process in which a more experienced person supports a less experienced person in his/her professional and personal growth (Beckett, 2010); and is defined in terms of the functions (processes) performed by the mentor (Colley, 2002; Young & Wright, 2001). It is a reflective practice that requires engagement, time and ongoing dialogue (Parker, Hall, & Kram, 2008). Career Mentoring Function

If mentoring is going to be successful in the professional arena, then interactions must exist between the mentor and the protégé. The interactions should include activities that will help to promote the protégé. The most extensive research on mentoring came from Kram's (1985) in which mentoring is defined as an interpersonal relationship between a more experienced employee and a less experienced employee to enhance career development. This qualitative study categorized mentoring into two functions: career and psychosocial functions. Career functions are those aspects of the relationship that enhance career advancement (Kao, 2014). The functions are primarily designed to develop and refine professional knowledge and skill (Johnson, 2007). Career mentoring functions provided to protégés include exposure and visibility, coaching, sponsorship, protection, and assigning challenging projects (Kram, 1985).

Both sponsorship and exposure and visibility involve the mentor providing public support for the protégé. This can involve the mentor providing recommendations or nominations (sponsorship) on behalf of the protégé or introducing (exposure and visibility) the protégé to key people in the organization (Baranik, Roling, & Elby, 2010). The goal is to make the protégé visible in positive ways and give key people in the organization a chance to see the protégé's potential. Another way to enhance career development for protégés is through coaching. The coach helps the protégé understand the political dynamics of an organization and how those dynamics can be used for career advancement. Providing challenging assignments additionally allows the protégé a chance to

develop and showcase skills while receiving support from the mentor who can serve as a shield if untimely or potentially career damaging situations occur.

Psychosocial Mentoring Functions

Psychosocial functions are another aspect in the mentoring relationship. Acceptance and confirmation, counseling, friendship, and role modeling are examples of psychosocial functions (Kram, 1985). The primary objective of these activities is to improve the protégés sense of self and social relations within the environment (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001) and the main reason for seeking external mentors (Patton, 2009). The psychosocial functions are those aspects of the relationship that enhance a sense of identity and effectiveness in a professional role (Kao, 2014).

Acceptance and confirmation allows both mentor and protégé to gain a sense of self through relationships by building on trust. This encourages the protégé to take risks and venture into unfamiliar activities that is often characterized by mutual social interactions more like a good friend or teacher (friendship). Another way to enhance the psychosocial mentoring development of protégés is through counseling which enables the individual to discuss internal conflicts as well as being a being able to express concerns regarding the conflicts. Mentors also embody the skills and behaviors (role modeling) necessary for successfully inhabiting a certain role (Mason & Bailey 2003). Through counseling and role modeling the protégé has someone available to provide social and emotional support, and affirmation.

The benefits of career and psychosocial mentoring functions are supported by researchers (Stamm, 2011; Tareef, 2013), which are designed to eventually advance leadership opportunities for female leaders. Ultimately, mentoring relationships (career and psychosocial) enable the protégé to transfer knowledge and experiences (Guillot, 2014).

Mentoring and the Superintendency

Although still significantly underrepresented as superintendents in comparison to percentages in teaching, women have made some gains in attaining the position of superintendent in the last decade (Jackson & Shakeshaft, 2003) mostly attributed to mentoring. According to McClellan, Ivory, & Dominquez (2008) results from a focus group of 50 new superintendents from seven states contends that it is important to support each other through mentoring by having opportunities to learn from more experienced superintendents. Additional results suggested that other aspects should be addressed in the mentoring relationship such as negotiating contracts, understanding board policies and politics, developing budgets, and working with parents and personnel. Gilmour and Kinsella (2009) also studied several dozen female superintendents across the state of New York and suggested that aspiring superintendents find two mentors, one in the field of education and one outside the field of education. This recommendation was deemed helpful because the protégé would have an expert in the field of education and one outside to give support and feedback.

Women seeking the superintendent position are "crawling through the window of a dream" in order to survey the terrain of the Superintendent (Brunner, 1999, p. 8). Mentoring relationships can greatly shape women's growth and potential in school leadership by boosting confidence and developing a sense of connection and identity as a leader (Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000). However, women are omitted from vital mentoring relationships and being excluded results in a negative cycle whereby women lacking mentors are less likely to advance and more inclined to leave the practice (Kay, Hagan, & Parker, 2009). Women are identified and trained to become a principal however; encouragement towards the becoming a superintendent must be intentional and purposeful (Alston 2000).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of career and psychosocial mentoring functions on the careers of women superintendents currently serving in a southern state. Both informal and formal mentoring relationships were explored and the way these relationships served as an effective tool on position attainment and career development. Although more is known about the nature of mentoring benefits, less is known about the relationships that women experience (Packard, Walsh & Seidenberg, 2004). This study contributes to the small body of literature on mentoring of women, especially those in the position of superintendent. This study was guided by the following research questions: 1) to what extent have women superintendents of a rural southern state been mentored? 2) to what extent have career-mentoring functions influenced the career advancement of women superintendents of a rural southern state? And 3) to what extent have psychosocial-mentoring functions influenced the career advancement of women superintendents of a rural southern state?

Methods

A researcher-designed survey was used to conduct this study. The survey instrument was based on the *Career and Psychosocial Mentoring Functions Questionnaire* (Hall, 2001; Wesley, 1997), the *Kinnersley Mentoring Survey* (Kinnersley, 2009), and the *Mentoring Questionnaire* (Giddis, 2003). An independent panel of experts, a pilot study with a selected sample of educational administrators, and statistical analysis were used to substantiate the validity of the instrument. Internal reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha test. The results from the internal consistency reliability test yielded a .991 Cronbach's alpha coefficient score. The final draft of the survey comprised 20 questions divided into two sections. Section I posed four items related to demographics data. Section II, mentoring functions profile, consisted of twenty items pertaining to the perceived value of the mentor's helpfulness regarding the career and psychosocial functions on career advancement. The participants responded to each of the 20 Likert-type questions and was scored on a 1 to 5 scale that includes the following response: 1=strongly disagreed, 2=disagreed, 3= undecided, 4=agreed and 5=strongly agreed.

The research population consisted of women who were currently serving as superintendents and assistant superintendents during the 2009-2010 school year. The State Department of Education reported 133 superintendents in the state with only 22% being women in addition to twenty-nine assistant superintendents. The population is relatively small so all female superintendents and assistant superintendents were surveyed. The names and address of the female superintendents and assistant superintendents were obtained from the State Department of Education Directory (2009).

Results

Research question one asked, "To what extent have women superintendents of this state been mentored?" The data analysis was completed using 28 participants (*N*=28 participants). The results of the surveys indicated that 62% of women surveyed have been mentored. The superintendents and/or assistant superintendents were all women; however their most significant mentor was male (53.6%) in comparison to 46.4 % female and Caucasian (71.4%) in comparison to 28.6% African American.

Research question two asked, "To what extent has career mentoring functions influenced the career advancement of women superintendents? The results of the ANOVA test (Table 1) indicated a statistically significant difference in means when comparing career means to the overall survey mean ($p<.01$). The strength of the relationship between the career means and overall mean scores, as assessed by η^2, was high accounting for 98% of the variance on the dependent variable.

Table 1

Career means compared with the overall mean

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Overall * CareerMean	Between Groups (Combined)	10.646	17	.626	34.630	.000
	Within Groups	.181	10	.018		
	Total	10.827	27			

Measures of Association

	Eta	Eta Squared
Overall * CareerMean	.992	.983

Research question three asked, "To what extent have psychosocial mentoring functions influenced the career advancement of women superintendents in a rural southern state?" The results of the ANOVA test (Table 2) indicated a statistically significant difference in means when comparing psychosocial means to the overall survey mean (p<.01). The strength of the relationship between psychosocial means and overall mean scores, as assessed by η^2, was high accounting for 82% of the variance on the dependent variable.

Table 2

Psychosocial means compared with the overall mean

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Overall * PsychoMean	Between Groups (Combined)	8.973	12	.748	6.052	.001
	Within Groups	1.853	15	.124		
	Total	10.827	27			

Measures of Association

	Eta	Eta Squared
Overall * PsychoMean	.910	.829

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistic was used to measure the differences between groups on specific career and psychosocial mentoring functions. ANOVA was conducted to determine if there were significant differences between the career mentoring functions of teaching, coaching, exposure/visibility, sponsorship and assigning challenging tasks and the psychosocial mentoring functions of role modeling, acceptance/confirmation, friendship, and counseling. The level of significance was set at the .05 level. Table 3 presents the results of the one-way analysis of variance for career mentoring functions. Table 4 presents the results of the one-way analysis of variance for psychosocial mentoring functions.

Table 3

Survey of results of one-way ANOVA for career mentoring functions

Variable	MSE	F	p	Eta^2
Teaching	2.55	8.92	.000	.718
Coaching	2.769	28.94	.000	.910
Exposure/Visibility	3.03	20.52	.000	.854
Sponsorship	3.09	23.79	.000	.686
Challenging tasks	4.67	41.04	.000	.877

Findings indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the career mentoring functions of teaching, coaching, exposure/visibility, sponsorship and assigning challenging tasks. Because the overall F test was significant, the strength of the relationship between each function of career means and overall mean scores was assessed by η^2. The η^2 of .91 for coaching indicated the strongest relationship between the variance on the dependent variable.

Table 4

Survey of results of one-way ANOVA for psychosocial mentoring functions

Variable	MSE	F	p	Eta^2
Role Modeling	1.04	19.02	.000	.869
Accept/confirm	1.51	40.95	.000	.903
Friendship	2.27	34.50	.000	.812
Counseling	1.83	39.97	.000	.874

Findings indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the psychosocial mentoring functions of role modeling, acceptance/confirmation, friendship, and counseling (Table 9). Because the overall F test was significant, the strength of the relationship between each function of psychosocial means and overall mean scores was assessed by η^2. The η^2 of .90 for acceptance/confirmation indicated the strongest relationship between the variance on the dependent variable.

ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the relationship between gender (male or female) of the mentor and the overall mean scores from the survey instrument (Table 5). The independent variable, gender factor, included two levels: male and female. The dependent factor was the overall mean scores from the survey that measured career and psychosocial mentoring functions. The ANOVA results for gender, was not significant, $F(1,26) = 2.27, p=.14$. The strength of the relationship between gender and overall mean scores, as assessed by η^2, was low accounting for 8% of the variance of the dependent variable. Table 6 reports the means and standard deviations.

Table 5

Gender ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Overall * Gender	Between Groups (Combined)	.869	1	.869	2.270	.144
	Within Groups	9.957	26	.383		
	Total	10.827	27			

Table 6

Mean and Standard Deviation for gender

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
male	4.1000	13	.77163
Female	4.4533	15	.44820
Total	4.2893	28	.63324

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of mentoring relationships on the career of women superintendents of a rural southern state. The results of this study showed that the career mentoring functions and psychosocial mentoring functions have a statistically significant impact on the careers of female superintendents. It can be concluded from this study that career mentoring functions, in particularly coaching, and psychosocial mentoring functions, acceptance/confirmation, helped influence the career development of female superintendents. Findings from this research indicate that mentoring relationships have the potential for female leaders to make successful transitions into the role of superintendent and career advancement. Godshalk & Sosik (2000) conducted a study and support the importance of acceptance/confirmation as one of the most important elements of effective mentoring relationships. However, in order to maximize career success, professionals should cultivate mentoring relationships throughout the career process (van Eck Peluchette & Jeanquart, 2000). Findings from this study support similar research outcomes that acknowledged the role of the mentor as a significant factor in psychosocial development (January, 2006) and career development (Tareef, 2013). Similar results have also been found in another study identifying the career mentoring function of coaching as an important factor in career advancement (Beres & Dixon, 2014); because mentoring has been linked to both job and career success.

Summary

The benefits of mentoring for professionals are well documented, yet gaps remain in the literature addressing the effects on mentoring for female leaders. Research on women as superintendents has been limited because there are a limited number of females in these positions; however, even a small sample can prove valuable to the understanding of this selective group (Beekley, 1999).   The need for more women in the superintendent's role is highlighted in this study due to the small survey population. However, current female superintendents can be more actively involved in the development, growth, and endurance of mentoring programs for newly appointed and aspiring female superintendents. Since the pool of potential same gender mentors is limited, those leaders in higher-level administrative positions should be more proactive in providing mentoring to aspiring female administrators to assist with developing and increasing the number of female superintendents. The profession should take the role of creating a different culture for the induction and mentoring of new administrators (Jacobson, Hickcox, & Stevenson, 1996).

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