

Female Educational Leadership through an East-West Metaphor: A Journey

Virginia Heslinga, Ed. D.¹

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ABSTRACT

Meeting the global need for educational leaders presents challenges for every school system due to economic, style, role, and cultural differences. Recruiting leaders who can work through the challenges stands as a goal for every school regardless of gender, yet females are underrepresented in educational leadership globally. This article is based on three years of research and interviews with female educational leaders in China and the United States and explores the idea that words and phrases used by female leaders communicate gender identity, intersections between ethnicities, economic levels, and cultural priorities. The word that arose most often in the interview responses from 35 female educational leaders, and that was used metaphorically by female educational leaders from remote rural areas of China to the New York City metropolitan area, was *journey*.

1. Introduction

The need for sufficient and effective educational leadership is an international issue suffused with tensions. Educational constituents have challenges in economic, management style, and role changes as described by Whitaker (2003). Investigations into how recruited educational leaders work with others reveal conundrums that overwhelm administrators and teachers (KexianandHao 2006). Gibb, Fergusson, and Horwood (2008) analyzed how the structure and organization of a school affected student achievement, graduation rate, and the methods used to address diverse learning styles, particularly in relation to gender. They also noted another correlation between gender and school practices and environment that definitively affected achievement.

Curiosity about the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership roles initially stimulated this educator's desire to learn whether the female leaders in two major countries representing East and West shared commonalities, and what precluded their admission into the upper echelons of educational leadership (Heslinga, 2010). Two years of research and focused interviews with female educational leaders in five provinces of China and five states of the United States, and six years of working with educational leaders designing continuing education opportunities in both rural and urban environments, allowed this writer to see places where enculturation segmented rather than blended feminist theory.

An open-ended investigation of the shared ideas, values, and procedures held by female educational leaders of East and West led to the discovery of a single metaphor spanning the wealthy suburbs of northern New Jersey to the poverty-stricken areas edging the BadainJaran desert in China. Although the interview respondents had diverse life experiences, training, family lives, and personal interests, the descriptions of their evolution into leaders included the same metaphor, a journey. Livholts (2012) revealed that a shared metaphor with equivalency in comprehension and meaning can create positive intersections.

Lykke (2010) suggested that metaphorical vision helps females find their way through deceptions, misinformation, and wrong ideas, and that metaphors have the transformative power of creating a map through the difficulties of life. Bose (2013) noted that system-centered studies allow the emergence of insights into intersections within systems. The purpose of this article is to reveal a metaphorical unity through an exploration of women in educational leadership who are separated by continents, oceans, cultures, and opportunities; the metaphor they shared, a journey—a concept that intersects with gender, culture, and leadership efforts in educational environments.

¹ Associate Professor of Humanities and Education, Anna Maria College, Paxton, MA 01612

2. Methods

This research study used qualitative methods that affirmed a sense of meaning from shared personal stories of life experiences (Creswell 2005). Heslinga (2010) confirmed Bleakley's (2005) examination of qualitative methods that found that stories frame diversity, perspectives, and intersectionality as they relate to global gender perceptions and practices. The methods employed in this research study considered themes and frameworks that included (a) narrative semantics, (b) sociocultural traditions, (c) intersectionality, (d) global gender inequality, (e) interpretation, (f) phenomenology, and (g) hermeneutics. White (2007) surmised that the theoretical elements of research methods are linked, but they need clear explanations. Coding the themes and theories that were revealed in the participants' answers brought internal preferences and beliefs to light (Tohar, Asaf, Kainan, and Shahar 2007).

Participants joined the study through convenient sampling and snowball sampling (Creswell 2007). United States participants easily recommended others who might join in the study, but few contacted agreed. Chinese participants more cautiously recommended additional contributors, yet all participants in China who were asked, agreed to answer the two open-ended interview questions, which were required of all participants: (1) Which experiences do you think led to your choice of a career as an educational leader? and (2) Out of those same experiences, which ones equipped you to face the daily challenges in your educational system? (Heslinga, 2010). In both countries some educational leaders provided interview answers during busy school days, while others did so when students and teachers were enjoying the summer break.

A full and accurate transcription was completed of each administrator's interview answers. The female leaders who agreed to be interviewed also had the option of writing or recording their answers to the questions. A Mandarin interpreter was available to both the interviewer and the interviewees to provide translation and had agreed to a confidentiality agreement, thus earning the trust of participants (Heslinga, 2010).

Four major themes evolved from the participants' answers: (a) life as a journey, (b) using experience to inform the educational community, (c) the value of life long learning, and (d) the benefit of mentoring experiences and a connection to role models. Data from 35 personal stories of the Han Chinese, Mongolian Chinese, and United States participants included new dimension in experiences of leadership practices, educational skills, personal values, coping techniques, and theories. Lykke (2010) explained that balance is essential when examining feminist theories that include reflections and interpretations. Yin (2007) described the additional elements one encounters, whether isolated or intersecting, when collecting many pieces of life experiences that create a cohesive and coherent story.

All participants had roles as educational leaders, appeared in the underrepresented statistics of female educational leaders, and faced common challenges: inequities in student populations, changes in educational experiences, and life as a gender role model. Other intersections between Chinese and United States participants included (a) a feeling of having achieved a much higher level in their career than they would have expected at the outset, (b) an attitude of responsibility to keep in close touch with the diverse levels of the educational community, (c) the recognition of an extra significance to their administrative role due to the female minority of educational leaders, and (d) the need to continue learning while also providing ongoing educational opportunities for other administrators and teachers. Halachmi and Ngok (2009) explained that the Chinese national goal to create world-class universities affects the goals of educational leaders, creating a feeling of standing at a crossroads.

Most participants from China were Han Chinese, but in remote regions, leaders in ethnic minority communities, such as Mongolian in Inner Mongolia, hold some educational leadership positions. Enwall (2010) reported that inter-ethnic intersections between those of Han Chinese and Mongolians center on tensions related to language, customs, expectations, and goals. Female educational leaders in Inner Mongolia who participated in this research revealed that the responsibilities of their jobs minimized ethnic differences and concerns. The Mongolian participants all knew some Chinese but had limited knowledge of English. The Han Chinese participants were fluent in English. Table 1 reveals the demographic information for the participants in China (ethnic backgrounds are not disclosed to maintain confidentiality).

Table 1. Demographic Information for Participants in China

Participant	School Setting	Years in Public Education	Degree Level	Role
1	Rural	30	BA	Assistant principal
2	Rural	23	BA	Principal
3	Urban	23	BA	Principal
4	Urban	11	BA	Assistant principal
5	Rural and urban	28	BA	Principal
6	Urban	10	MA	Principal
7	Urban	22	MA+	Principal
8	Urban	14	BA	Principal
9	Rural and urban	17	BA	Assistant principal
10	Rural	25	BA	Principal
11	Rural	5	BA	Assistant principal
12	Urban	20	BA	Assistant principal
13	Rural and urban	28	BA	Assistant principal
14	Rural and urban	25	BA	Principal
15	Rural	29	BA	Assistant principal
16	Rural	19	BA	Assistant principal
17	Rural	27	BA	Assistant principal
18	Urban	25	MA	Superintendent
19	Urban	15	MA	Superintendent
20	Rural and urban	18	BA	Superintendent
21	Rural and urban	15	BA	Principal

(Heslinga, 2010)

In urban and rural locations, the female educational leaders from China exhibited pride in their locale and insisted on introducing the interviewer to cultural staples of the area including food, history, music, and social relationships, and walking the interviewer through the educational system with visits to schools, cultural centers, special cultural events, and meetings with other educational leaders. In the United States, the interviewees emphasized busy schedules, major projects, and assumptions that the interviewer, an American, had knowledge of the locale, customs, and social relationships of the communities, school systems, and state and national government guidelines for education. There was no invitation from United States participants for socializing beyond an invitation to let interviewees know about any of their contributions appearing in a publication.

Table 2 shows the demographic information for participants in the United States.

Table 2. *Demographic Information for Participants in the United States*

Participant	School Setting	Years in Public Education	Degree Level	Role
1	Rural and urban	30	Terminal	Superintendent
2	Urban	30	Terminal	Superintendent
3	Rural	25	MA+	Principal
4	Urban	30	Terminal	Superintendent
5	Urban	20	MA+	Principal
6	Rural and urban	30	Terminal and 2nd MA	Principal
7	Urban	20	MA+	Superintendent
8	Rural	25	MA+	Superintendent
9	Urban	15	Terminal	Superintendent
10	Rural and urban	35	Terminal	Principal
11	Urban	30	Terminal	Assistant principal
12	Rural and urban	35	MA+	Superintendent
13	Urban	11	MA+	Principal
14	Urban	35	MA+	Principal

(Heslinga, 2010)

In comparing responses from female educational leaders in China to those in the United States, the participants were predominantly categorized by gender, then by country, urban or rural locations, position in the educational community, years of experience in education, and educational leadership training. Underrepresentation in leadership stimulated interest in this research effort, but as Dillabough (2003) highlighted, cultural attitudes toward gender affect personal, social, and societal behaviors. Lata and Sharma (2012) explained that feminist approaches have many facets that can intersect through money, power, relationships, and culture.

The two questions asked of each participant elicited answers as short as two sentences and as long as several typed pages. Standing (2009) found that hermeneutic phenomenology provided insight into observations, perspectives, and relationships that can affect choices and evaluative skills. Wu and Mao (2011) discussed how global culturalization affects Chinese perspectives as the media heightens internal changes, global differences, and political directions from the highest offices. Participants in this research, whether in Shanghai or western Inner Mongolia, acknowledged that growing world influences on China hastened changes in attitudes toward gender roles, education, and life choices. Halachmi and Ngok (2009) implied that balancing academic excellence in times of economic challenge superseded gender concerns, ethnicities put the focus on finding solutions, funding, and strategies for revitalizing education.

Answers to the interview questions differed in scope between the two countries. Even with the availability of an interpreter, the Chinese administrators wanted to practice using their English when giving their answers, thus their responses were not as lengthy. Each response had some unique words or phrases, but some words appeared with frequency. Table 3 presents the words related to work that were used most frequently from 21 Chinese administrators.

Table 3. *Frequently Used Words in Descriptions of Administrative Work, Number and Percentage, from Female Educational Leaders in Five Provinces in China*

Experience	13, 61%
Manage	4, 19%
Challenges, change	7, 33%
Improve, keep up, compete	17, 81%
Learn, train, study, guide, teach	20, 95%
Society, social, socialize	11, 52%
People	9, 43%
Technology	4, 19%

The participants from the United States used many of these same words as they described their responsibilities. Heslinga (2010) showed that the challenges of the educational leaders in China had great similarity to the challenges faced by educational leaders in the United States. However, it is important to note that the concept of feminist figuration, as described by Lykke (2010), may be applicable here as the female subjects strove to achieve their goals in education while always conscious of their role in the public eye. The female leaders planned to continue their efforts with positive expectations for self and others. Table 4 presents the words related to work that were used most frequently by the 14 American administrators.

Table 4. *Frequently Used Words in Descriptions of Administrative Work, Number and Percentage, from 14 Female Educational Leaders Interviewed in Five States in the United States*

Experience	9, 64%
Manage	4, 28%
Challenges, change	14, 100%
Improve, keep up, compete	8, 57%
Learn, train, study, guide, teach	10, 71%
Society, social, socialize	1, 7%
People	12, 86%
Technology	1, 7%

One word that appeared only in the narratives from the American female leaders was *love*. Five (35 percent) of the 14 female administrators from the United States used the word *love* for some aspect of their work. Czarnecki (2010) found the attitude leaders exhibit, such as enthusiastic enjoyment for their job, can help people working with them to improve in performance. Though the interviewees lived and worked in culturally changing societies, they sought to combine realism with enthusiasm and conventions with innovations.

Lykke (2010) cautioned researchers to think about their own inclinations, education, and assumptions via the metaphor of academic baggage. Nevertheless, two assumptions preceded this research: (1) Ideas that women in roles predominantly held by men would have many experiences, challenges, and values in common, and (2) a belief that much more than the ability to have children would connect these women's hopes, expectations, choices, values, and goals, and that the approach they took in regard to relationships, tasks, and responsibilities, whether they were on one side of the world or the other, would be unique due to intersecting life experiences related to gender, education, and the mantle of leadership.

In unpacking the first assumption, the time spent with the female educational leaders affirmed it as realistic. The inter-sectionality of experiences, challenges, and values faced and chosen by these women often aligned individually, relationally, and socially. Finding the intersections, not just in the lives of each participant but throughout a country and even globally, provides many more paths for investigation into the understanding of genders. Shields (2008) provided insight into the issue of inter-sectionality by encouraging a search for models of intersections that can inform the methodology for studying gender. Acknowledging intersections in life leads to seeing those connections in groups and cultures, and even globally.

In considering the second set of assumptions, those holding that beyond biology women would share hopes, expectations, choices, values, and goals, as well as common approaches, evidence emerged frequently enough to confirm them. According to Bose (2012), much research done around the world using an intersectional framework focuses on diversity, and research into the global gender inequality that keeps females in the minority in top-level leadership roles reveals ideas, values, and procedures that affect both genders. Systems and cultural expectations, especially in high-priority areas such as education of the young, increase the possibilities for the intersection of concerns, choices, and comparisons. Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011) suggested that consideration of female management styles not only matters in the workplace but also in programs that help develop leadership skills and roles for women. How leaders develop approaches and attitudes will affect systems. Oreg and Berson (2011) revealed that the attitude of educational leaders is the chief component for transforming systems by inspiring a positive attitude toward change.

3. The Journey Metaphor Framework for Cross-Cultural Understanding

A *journey* in ancient times and Middle Ages referred to an act, travel, or work in a day. In the 21st century, *journey* is used to describe an amount of time in travel or passage from one point or phase to another. Kovecses (2002) noted that the ways people speak about life often connect to how they discuss journeys. In addition, Kovecses found that cognitive challenges with an abstraction like life could increase understanding and communication through the more concrete idea of a journey. When exploring love, challenges, and values, the use of journey as a metaphor shows broad international applications for the concept in learning, illness, trauma, and spirituality.

Low and Littlemore (2009) found that teachers and students—both native and nonnative English speakers—saw the journey metaphor as positive and productive in regard to learning. Katz and Taylor (2008) conducted a semantic study of themes that arose from the statement, “life is a journey,” and discovered that the metaphor worked like a thematic trigger. Fiore and Rosenquest (2010) used the journey metaphor in an attempt to analyze approaches to pedagogy and accompanying tensions. When exploring German concepts associated with music and education, Varkoy (2010) found that the word *journey* emerged as a metaphor.

In evaluating the importance of reflection for teacher candidates, Smith and Kariuki (2011) used the journey metaphor to analyze phases of teacher education. The learning process engaged in interdisciplinary studies ties to the journey metaphor in Andersson and Kalman’s (2010) ideas of the personal changes that occur as students build understanding of differing knowledge discourses. Jasman (2010) expanded the journey metaphor as it relates to professional development for educators.

Pineda (2009) found that the journey metaphor is respected by and used for personal narratives, processes, and events as it relates to Chicano identity. Hotep (2008) explained how African-centric identity breaks with European influences via the journey metaphor. Heaney (2011) studied Italian and English translators and noted increased cultural mediation and sensitivity regarding the use of the word *journey*. Akhurst (2010) promoted the journey metaphor for connecting freedom, progress, exploration, and spiritual experiences. In a study of symbols in the Christchurch, New Zealand, train station, Barthelmeh (2011) aligned train journeys to spiritual journeys and the individual choices that occur in a life journey.

Common connections combining concepts across cultures are not the only places one finds the journey metaphor. In the powerful areas of spirituality, eternity, and life-and-death issues, *journey* emerges as an image that intersects experiences, therapy practices, traumas or death. In the Bochaver and Fenko (2010) study of the metaphors used by unknown and celebrity Russian adults seeking psychological help, narratives for happy and unhappy times included the word *journey*. Byrne (2008) discovered that the language used by caregivers includes the journey concept.

Journey as a metaphor allows one to examine phases of illness, treatment options, and fears. Öresland, Määttä, Norberg, and Lützén (2011) gathered reflections that described home-based nursing care as a never-ending journey. Ferguson, Worrall, Davidson, Hersh, Howe, and Sherratt (2010) noted that the journey metaphor allowed patients and families to more fully describe their experiences with therapies, and journey often attached to ideas of recovery. Girls who had suffered abuse and trauma in Africa allowed Ncube (2010) to engage them in narrative therapy, and the concept of a journey helped map ideas and guide the traumatized victims toward hope and healing.

Thomas (2010) declared that concepts used today have made a journey through translations and applications, resulting in a global diffusion. The intersections of metaphorical concepts such as a journey informed this researcher with knowledge of infused international visualizations, and left the question: Would a study reveal that males have a common metaphor for leadership in education? Bose (2012) reminded students of global gender inequality that shifts continue to take place and even though a concept holds a place internationally, they will change.

4. The Journey Metaphor Shared by East and West Female Educational Leaders

Women occupy a greater percentage of educational leadership roles in China than in the United States, but in both countries women in this field stand at a minority percentage. According to the All-China Women Federation, 36 percent of educational leaders in China are women; the American Association of School Administrators reported that women held fewer than 22 percent of school leadership positions in the United States (Heslinga 2010).

A leadership crisis exists in East and West educational districts and should have educational systems seeking qualified candidates regardless of gender. Johansen (2007) empirically determined that the organizational management strategies used by women had a more positive effect than those used by men. Rinehart (2005) found that male and female leaders' work ethic can vary in style but their level of fairness is of primary concern to those they lead. In a study of business schools, Offermann (2007) concluded that women must be inspired and influenced by others to choose leadership roles.

Palladino, Grady, Haar, and Perry (2007) reported that the 21st century's expected high levels of retirements place especially rural areas in jeopardy for superintendents. The authors noted that female educational leaders in rural areas have sustained achievement and suggest this phenomenon is worthy of additional study. Eagly and Carli (2007) recounted the obstacles that societies place in front of women and found many more permeable blocks than glass ceilings. Eagly and Carli settled on the metaphor of a labyrinth for 21st-century women—a combination of confusing choices and paths.

Of the 35 female educational leaders in China and the United States who were interviewed for this study, the average number of years in education for the 21 Chinese female educational leaders—superintendents, principals, and assistant principals—was 20.4. For the 14 female American educational leaders—superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, and assistant principals—the average number of years in education was 26.5.

During the collection of open-ended responses from interviewees in China, this researcher felt some surprise that a principal in a remote rural region, with not even four years of college education, used the same concept of a journey to describe her position, as had a highly educated female leader in Shanghai. Surprise grew as interviewees in the United States from rural Maine to the New York City metropolitan area included the metaphor of a journey in reflecting on their life experiences and leadership responsibilities. None of the participants from the East had visited the United States, nor did they read the same books, poetry, journals, curriculum guides, marketing promotional materials, or listen to the same music, enjoy the same art, and watch the same television programs or movies. While they did all use the Internet; however, not all the participants in China read English, and China's educational leaders do not have the same diversity of choice for Internet reading that is available to educators in the United States. None of the participants in the United States could read Mandarin.

How does a female principal living at the edge of the Gobi, who has little formal education or resources, use the same metaphor for moving into leadership as a superintendent of schools with education beyond a doctorate and rich access to resources in a suburb of New York City? Is journey a metaphor that provides insight into a female approach to leadership in an educational system? Do genders visualize and have preferences for specific metaphors?

Zhang (2011) explored corporate identities in China and found that metaphors solidly joined and morphed collective ideas for individuals and corporations. Zhang surmised that the choice of metaphor revealed unique aspects of a corporate body and provided consumers with an element for evaluating the service and economic value of a corporation, institution, or system. Gunbayi (2011) analyzed school management via the metaphors used by educational leaders and found that schools had a management process that connected to the metaphors principals used.

Eagly and Carli (2007) noted that a search for competent and effective students and systems can combine with research on female educational leaders who use a more participatory style—inclusive, collaborative, encouraging, motivating, and democratic. Zhou and Cui (2007) described a need for intercultural competence in 21st-century students and educational environments that prepare students with knowledge and skills for global connections. Perhaps a key to understanding female educational leadership in the East

and West can emerge through an investigation of their insights and ideas based on the expressed journey metaphor.

5. Use of the Journey Metaphor by Female Educational Leader

The reoccurring metaphor of a journey used by women of different generations, economic social strata, and educational levels who were literally half a world apart is an intriguing linguistic image. Pasveer (2010) affirmed that, when shared, organizational metaphors can lead to more effective internal learning. Coeckelbergh (2010) found that metaphors shaped lives and actions from morals to engineering. Gunbayi (2011) investigated how the metaphors of principals affect school life and discovered that metaphors not only reveal a school leader's potential for success but also provide intervention ideas to help struggling administrators and schools. Low and Littlemore (2009) described how metaphors can confuse more than help advance understanding when speakers of different languages use the metaphor without a focused definition.

The journey metaphor that evolved from this research details cohesion of thoughts, experiences, and beliefs, despite differing backgrounds and global challenges. The following are extracts from the interviews that highlight the journey metaphor.

A 14-year principal in a large city in the United States:

I've always been a problem solver; growing up I struggled, especially in my teenage years. I ran away from home a lot and hated school. When I speak to students now, I do know where they are coming from... When I face a challenge, I look at it like there has to be a solution and how can "we" work this out. I think bringing up a family and going to school part-time made me appreciate my education more as I worked really hard. I share this with students at times. Life just took me on this path in my journey.

A superintendent with 25 years of experience in education in an industrial city in China:

When I moved through levels of administrative departments, I listened, considered different views, and tried to learn more about each level. I attended many meetings with other leaders, but I did not forget the qualities and practices I had used as a teacher. These qualities [of] showing kindness and care for others allowed me to guide teachers in their journeys, and I kept holding to these qualities as I moved up in leadership positions.

A principal with 35 years of experience in education in a small city in the United States:

I believe that my training and teaching special education students provided me with a perspective that has been invaluable my entire career as principal. So often a behavior problem is really a learning problem or possible disability. So often the parent sees a "lazy" child, or the teacher sees the child not working "hard enough." But, when you can look with a different perspective, you can begin to help the parent or help the teacher and move toward diagnosis. Then you can remove the clichés and start on the road to really helping the child. My work with special education and my work with the courts give me a wide knowledge of the legal system, its workings, and the law. It gives me insight into networking parents who come for help with children in or not in my school. My knowledge of the law maintains a critical sense of what parents can do, what they cannot do, as well as what teachers (and I) can do and what we cannot do legally. . . . In summary, I never began my career as an educator with the goal of being a principal. I fell into it from need. However, I love my job, I love my kids (mine and school), I love my staff, and we have an exemplary school. . . . The journey brought me here, not my design.

A leader with 30 years in education in an urban environment in the United States:

After teaching for many years, I decided I would like to be a leader, and I became a supervisor. After that I knew I could be a good educational leader and took my administrative and superintendent courses and exams. Daily challenges are part of this leadership position. I believe in, "Speak kind words, receive kind echoes." To listen attentively is important. To show compassion while always exercising fairness is key. At times, the kind echoes do not sound. However, most of the time, with time, they do. Keeping current is also an element that is important. Networking, leading, and making connections make this journey possible.

An assistant superintendent with 30 years in education in a rural district in the United States:

When I think back to the journey I experienced on my way to becoming an educational leader, it becomes clear that it was more an “evolution” rather than a conscious “choice.” That is not to say that specific, important, and often risky choices weren’t made along the way, but the journey to the end product was truly a development—an evolution if you will. Having earned a master’s degree in English in 1980 from the University of Pittsburgh, when I moved to southern New Jersey, many of my new teaching colleagues were driving an hour each way to Rowan University for master’s classes. I remember distinctly thinking that I would never have to make that trip as I already had a master’s degree. Boy, was I mistaken! As I continued to teach and become familiar with the supervisory structure of my school, I thought it might be a good idea to take the four courses needed to obtain a supervisor’s certificate.

After receiving the supervisor’s certificate, I realized that I was more than halfway through a full master’s in educational leadership so why not continue. Reflecting, I also know that I never could have completed the program without the tremendous support of friends, as I was a single mother with two small children. When I stop to think about it, I really don’t know how I did it!

I did become the English department chairperson, the supervisor of special projects, and then ultimately the assistant superintendents of schools. Many people through the years have questioned how I attained that position without having been a school principal. Nowhere is it written that a principalship is a prerequisite for assistant superintendent, although the administrative journey often travels through that role. My contentment with my position and the sincere enjoyment I received from working with teachers throughout the district resulted in my applying for the superintendent position.

Having worked in the school district for over twenty years and feeling extensive support from colleagues, I entered the application process. One particular night, a week before interviews were to begin, I overheard two Board of Education members talking in the hallway outside my office, and after listening for a few moments, I realized that they were talking about me! Right then and there I realized that I would never be able to break through the “good old boys’ club” that everyone spoke about, and that in fact, it really did exist. Not wanting to torture myself knowing what the outcome would be, I respectfully withdrew my application.

A principal with 23 years of experience in rural and urban environments in China:

I chose to be a teacher as a career. I always do my best in teaching and have been viewed as outstanding for many years. Because of my reputation and abilities as a teacher, I was voted into a leadership position. I have studied and worked hard. I like to think, and studying is also very interesting in many new things in our journey through life. Thinking and studying help me to find the best ways to resolve problems.

A principal with 20 years of experience in an urban environment in China:

Certainly I have learned much along the journey. I have made my mistakes and have learned to accept responsibility for them. All of my experiences helped to bring me to where I am today. We are the sum of our experiences and bring them to every encounter in life.

The why is important. Along the way I had wonderful mentors who took me under their wings. I listened and worked hard to reach the place I am today. Learning the political challenges was the hardest. Fair is not always equal, and my sense of fairness and the need to treat everyone—students, parents, teachers—equally has been difficult. I have learned to adjust my thinking when the squeaky wheel gets the prize, as it is often in the spirit of cooperation.

A United States superintendent with 30 years of experience in education in both urban and suburban districts:

An educational leader must have excellent interpersonal skills in order to work with different groups of people (i.e., teachers, students, parents, and board members). I believe my interpersonal skills have been instrumental in my success. My cultural and familial experiences (being raised in an Italian family) initially developed my interpersonal skills.

Moreover, my interpersonal skills were heightened throughout my experiences as a classroom teacher for 17 years. My own staff appreciates and respects that I was “in the trenches” and that enhances our relationship. . . . While working as a director of curriculum and testing, I had to “sell” programs and educational strategies to the administrators because many of them didn’t understand the importance of the newer methodologies.

The general experience gained when working as a director, assistant superintendent, and interim superintendent really helped me in my current position of superintendent/principal. Being a central office employee gave me the ability to think globally. Before making a decision, I reflect upon how it will affect the system rather than the individual.

In summary, having been an administrator since 1992 equipped me to face the daily challenges that arise in my district. Having said that, I still encounter unique challenges in this journey that baffle me.

An assistant principal with 29 years in education in a rural area of China:

Teaching is a job for people working for society. Teachers, as farmers, spend their time in the life journey taking care of trees that will blossom in the future. Students will work for the society, and people will enjoy the shadows under the tree in summer. I chose my career, to be an educational leader, because of the chance that I can train other teachers to teach better too. Facing daily changes, we have to see all the new things [as] . . . positive signs, finding the negative part and changing it for the better. Changing courses to fit modern society, changing teaches groups foundations.

6. Journey Concept Effects on Educational Leadership

The journey metaphor includes actions as well as travel through places, times, and experiences that can stand as passages, phases, and work. An examination of the leadership journeys the women administrators in the East and West have taken shows the global truth in Eagly and Carli's (2007) observations that marriage, parenthood, and advanced levels of education frequently lead to higher wages for men but not for women, and that success for a female leader often is attributed to hard work rather than skill. The interview narratives did not accentuate the ongoing differences between pay scales and acclaim but focused instead on accounts of actions, lifelong learning, work, phases, and passages. As Creswell (2009) affirmed, consideration of particulars can build insight into generalized concepts. Gibbs (2008) saw the increased use of metaphors in interdisciplinary fields as a sign of recognition of the value for complex levels of communication and a desire to understand fundamental thoughts of culture.

6.1 Actions

In their answers to the questions about what led to the choice of a career as an educational leader or what facilitated choosing a beneficial course of action in leading a school or educational system, the female leaders mentioned listening, caring, kindness, compassion, problem solving, interpersonal skills, forging ahead, changing courses, use of materials, incorporating technology, and study. Oreg and Berson (2011) analyzed data from 75 school principals and 586 teachers and discovered that when facing change a leader's traits and attitudes cue constituents' responses and actions. Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) found that women had opportunities to move into leadership more often in times of crisis due largely to stereotyped attributes including an ability to motivate others through a crisis, sociability, encouragement, and interpersonal skills. The actions expected of and taken by the East and West female leaders include high value for communicating to and caring for others.

6.2 Lifelong Learning

Most, though not all, of the interviewees had taken extra courses, studies, training, and tests to attain consideration for a leadership role, thus placing a high value on lifelong learning. Ely et al. (2011) saw leadership development training as a way to engender senior leadership roles for women. O'Bannon, Garavalia, Renz, and McCarther (2010) argued for increased accessibility to ongoing training for women in leadership responsibilities.

It is clear from the interviews with these female educational leaders of the East and West that in traveling the paths and roads of their life journeys, they not only valued training for self, but also for others. For those who lead in rural districts, accessibility and financial factors prohibit participation in many opportunities. Leaders in small rural districts bear the burden of trying to advance academic success with less availability to dynamic learning and fewer resources. Female educational leaders who are not in the highest administrative positions work tactfully as a subordinate to gain materials and training for their districts.

6.3 Work

Brinia (2011) reported that women valued the human aspect of their work, which led to relationship building. Often this empowered others and incorporated more inclusive participation, problem solving, and resolutions. Relatedly, Valentine, Godkin, Page, and Rittenburg (2009) found greater application of ethical decision making and altruism among female educational leaders throughout their work days. Burns and Martin (2010) discovered that teachers valued leaders who invited participation, showed respect to others,

and demonstrated trustworthiness. The work of the female educational leaders required a commitment to keeping current, understanding approaches to thinking globally, establishing trust, modeling respect, building consensus, problem solving, encouraging colleagues, and setting and reaching goals. This work creates many intersections in their journey, taking them through time, places, and experiences.

6.4 Phases and Passages

The interview responses revealed that the female leaders recognized how their choices had affected their options and taken them through segments of life. Those who mentioned working with mentors reflected positively on the guidance the more experienced leader provided. Bakioglu, Hacifazlioglu, and Ozcan (2010) examined the mentoring given by school principals and found that the phase of life of the principal affected the trust level of those who worked with the principal. Many narratives included a look back over the years in education combined with goals for the present phase and the future.

A Chinese principal with 17 years in education in both urban and rural areas:

I have been in teaching many years. I understand what needs to be improved and the problems teachers are having in many areas. I know I need to keep learning new technologies for teaching and working with others. With my experience, I chose to be a leader and to train young teachers while I also manage the school well.

A United States principal marked phases by career changes and degrees earned:

Initially I moved into education because of a lack of respect and inclusion in the business world. I am a career changer from business to education when I was 35. After completing my bachelors in elementary education and master's degree in special education, I did some subbing in various states. Eventually I became certified as assistant principal/principal and director of special education. I worked in regular education and special education. The next step was to take on leadership responsibilities as special education chair and assistant principal. From there I worked as English language arts curriculum coordinator. I have been a principal now for the past nine years. In every career change, I have taken the job to its potential, and I needed a change.

7. Conclusion

The use of a journey metaphor, deliberately or subconsciously, connected female educational leaders of different generations, world regions, educational levels, life experiences, and cultures. Smith and Kariuki(2011) concluded that the journey metaphor reveals an attitude of moving through a process that includes stages and required reflection. Spakowski (2011) declared that western ideas of feminism have affected concepts of gender introducing new areas for clashes, but they have offered more trouble in the conceptualization of feminism in China than helpful development of theory. Gender, feminism, education, choices, leadership, role models, attitudes, goals, and values intersected more than they diverged in the lives of these study participants. A larger global study of more than two major countries of East and West may find the journey metaphor evident in the imagery of many female educational leaders, particularly if one includes the idea of a road or path.

Whether in responsibilities and fields requiring reflection or in searching for a way to describe the stages of life, the journey metaphor connects female educational leaders in this study. Each participant used the metaphor philosophically to explain choices, lessons learned, actions, plans not yet realized, and acceptance of life phases in ongoing responsibilities that create stressful, pressured situations. Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) found that when gender and stereotypes are applied to employment, women's metaphors and actions are more desirable in crisis situations. The journey, path, or travel metaphor mentioned by women reveals a management and learning style that educational systems should consider when hiring leaders (Ely et al. 2011). Global change is occurring faster than systems can accept or have the possibility to meet, revealing the possibility of multiple crises for educational systems.

Educational leadership requires the skills and abilities to successfully guide a group of people on a journey through many intersecting challenges. The female educational leaders documented here, whether in western Inner Mongolia, Shanghai, rural Maine, or the New York metropolitan area, have embraced their journeys and responsibilities for choosing directions at the often confusing intersections of personal and professional choices. They plan to continue guiding those who look to them toward the steps to take now and in the future. Dialogues and research transcending location and culture will continue to illuminate theories and central issues in life's intersections related to gender.

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