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Book Review: Women in the Superintendency: Discarded Leadership

Rebekah Buchanan

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Women in the Superintendency: Discarded Leadership. Joyce A. Dana and Diana M. Bourisaw. 2006. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education. 249 pp. Illustrations. \$65.00 (hardcover). \$34.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Rebekah Buchanan¹

“The title and theme for this book, discarded leadership, comes from a common practice of the American public to ‘discard’ that which they do not want or no longer want, regardless of its quality, capacity, competency, life, and vigor. Webster’s (1996) defines discarding as to ‘cast aside or dispose of’; *to discard an old hat.*” (74)

In *Women in the Superintendency*, Dana and Bourisaw present both the historical backdrop for women’s roles in the public school system as well as contemporary commentary by women themselves on their stories of navigating the murky waters of school leadership. They not only engage the reader in the struggles of women in the context of schools, they also create scenarios that could arguably apply to women working toward gender equality in leadership positions in other fields as well. Ending the text with the challenges faced by women leaders as well as applicable steps to overcome these challenges, Dana and Bourisaw create a must read book for anyone entertaining a career in school leadership.

Dana and Bourisaw begin by placing leadership into a historical context. In the first paragraph they let the reader know that “social justice does not exist for women” (1) and they support this through a history lesson detailing over 100 years of workplace injustices. They reveal that research over the past two decades shows that women leaders have had increased difficulty both in successfully meeting challenges and in overcoming barriers. This gender factor, supported by both past research and their interviews with 25 women who are past and present superintendents, becomes the basis for what they hope to explore as they set out to define what barriers exist and how women can overcome them.

Dana and Bourisaw start with the obvious barriers of gender, sexism, discrimination, and gender structuring. They smoothly and systematically transition from these tenets to the exploration of ideological factors such as politics, religion and sociocultural contexts that create barriers to women’s leadership success. Discussions of all these factors are backed not only with solid data, but also engaging anecdotes such as that of Superintendent Susan Radkin who realized the importance of working with her school board to identify families who had leadership within the community for a number of years in order to help establish a new foundation in the community. Radkin brought leaders in these families together to help design a foundation to support both the interests of the schools and the community. Without the knowledge of the importance of these community members, Radkin could have ended up pitting her goals against those of the

¹ Rebekah Buchanan is a Ph.D Candidate in Urban Education with a Certificate in Women’s Studies at Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA.

much more established, traditional community leaders, instead of achieving success with her foundation.

Stories such as this one introduce the discussion of power in Dana and Bourisaw's text. They expand on Bruner's (1999) findings that women build power collaboratively, "with" others, while men primarily work with a power "over" ideology. They emphasize that even though the idea of creating power collaboratively seems the best policy, in actuality one struggle that is readily apparent is that school boards and school workers view collaborative power as a sign of weakness, creating another barrier. This discussion segues to an exploration of how women in leadership positions negotiate (and at times do not negotiate) power. It is here where the argument that women leaders are easily discarded is apparent. School districts at times create revolving door superintendencies, moving onto a new one every two or three years. For men, this more than likely means a new, and sometimes better, position. For women, however, this could mean not being able to achieve the leadership roles they have worked so hard to obtain.

Barriers surrounding power are not the only ones covered by Dana and Bourisaw. They also outline for the reader the make-up of classroom teachers, addressing what causes the disparity between the faces of the teachers, mostly female, and those of individuals in positions of power, predominately white males. They answer this question by examining the larger structural weaknesses, namely the business of schooling and the shortage of qualified teachers. The authors then seek to define teacher leadership and leadership roles, arguing that the marketplace works to define and support a gender prejudice that moves women away from positions of power.

Dana and Bourisaw do not forget to address dilemmas such as women's nonsupport of women, which at times sabotages the women who do eventually rise to the position of leader. There is also the reality that women are often more place-bound than their male counterparts, needing to stay in one location, and therefore become extremely limited in terms of job acceptance and availability. Then there is the struggle to gain another position after termination, an issue with which male superintendents are rarely concerned. In addressing challenges and dilemmas such as these, Dana and Bourisaw create a well-rounded and realistic picture of what women who seek to become leaders in school districts are likely to face.

After using the first 8 chapters of the book to illustrate the challenges for women as they work towards leadership positions in schools and school districts, Dana and Bourisaw use Chapters 9 and 10 to present practical ways for women to create a strategic plan in order to work towards gaining and keeping leadership positions. Using Chapter 9 to focus on support, subtopics spotlight how to gain support, making sure women have sponsorship, finding mentors, and participation in networks both before and during superintendency. These steps help lay the groundwork for women as they plan to move into the school leadership roles.

Also useful is the clever and matter-of-fact way the final chapter can be turned into a checklist for women seeking superintendent positions. Divided into sections titled Self Development, Sociocultural Checks, Building and Maintaining Support Systems, Communication Savvy, School Board-Superintendent Relations, Strategic and Political Leadership, Facing Dismissal and Maintaining a Leadership Position, Dana and Bourisaw use the lessons learned in earlier chapters to create a guide for readers. With recommendations of effective reading, writing and speaking techniques as well as tips for

ways to create relations with the school board when starting out as a superintendent, Dana and Bourisaw give readers ways in which to move forward in breaking through the glass ceiling.

Another strength of *Women in the Superintendency* is its applicability to classroom teaching. All chapters but the final one end with a Case Study and Chapter Questions that are geared towards discussion around the case study and how the chapter can be applied to the case. Questions that ask the reader to think about how they would handle the situation differently or how they feel the individual in the case study should proceed highlight the applicability of the text.

This text will be of value in any educational leadership program. Because of its readability and utility, Dana and Bourisaw have written a book that should be required reading for any person seeking to earn the position of superintendent. Hopefully, this will be the first of many books placing women at the forefront in the discussion of who are in positions of power in our nation's schools.

Works Cited

Bruner, CC. (1999). *Sacred Dreams: Women and the Superintendency*. Albany: State University of New York Press.