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Career Patterns of High-Level Women School Administrators

Jean Stockard

This paper examines the career paths of a national sample of women holding line administrative posts in public schools. The women appear to have career moves similar to those documented for men in other studies. Superintendents, assistant superintendents, and principals generally follow different career paths, but variations in career paths by the time period in which they entered the labor force, their attitudes toward career mobility, and the relative status of their jobs are not large. The importance of the counselor's position as a stepping stone to administration is noted.

Several authors have noted women's underrepresentation in school administration (e.g., Fishel & Pottker, 1974; Jones & Montenegro, 1982; Schmuck, 1980). Less than one-fourth of all school administrators are women, and most of these are in lower-level posts. Fewer than 2% of all superintendents; 9% of all deputy, assistant, or associate superintendents; 10% of all secondary school principals are women (Jones & Montenegro, 1982).

This paper describes the experiences of this unique group of women educators: those who have attained what are generally considered the top-line administrative posts of superintendent, assistant superintendent, and high school principal. Data from a national sample are used to examine the career paths these women took to attain their current positions, with specific attention given to how the type of position the respondents hold, the time period in which they entered the labor force, their attitudes toward career mobility, and the relative status of their jobs affect these paths.

Previous Research

Most studies of career paths or career mobility take an organizational perspective, building on Weber's analysis of bureaucracies (Gerth & Mills, 1946) and the notion that career patterns develop in ways that coincide with the structure of bureaucratic organizations (e.g., Levenson, 1961). Studies of career patterns in education in recent years have generally focused on one position within a large organizational setting (e.g., March & March, 1977; Carlson, 1972) or on a number of positions within a specific geographical area (Carlson, 1979; Gaertner, 1981; Ortiz, 1982), and generally include mainly men in their sample. The studies suggest that while most administrators remain in their current positions in any one year, those who attain the top-line positions in education usually move through a fairly regularized series of jobs in doing so. The most common route to the superintendency appears to be from an assistant superintendent's post, with movement from the secondary principal's position the next most common path. The most common way to move into an assistant superintendent's slot is probably from a central office staff position (Gaertner, 1981), while the vice principal position commonly provides a

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route to a principalship (Gaertner, 1981; Ortiz, 1982).

Studies of the career patterns of women administrators are rare, undoubtedly because women's typical educational career path is so short, usually from teaching to an elementary principalship or a central office staff position. Available studies tend to focus on only the superintendency (e.g., Coatney, 1982; Costa, 1981; Frasher, Frasher, & Hardwick, 1982; McDade & Drake, 1982). None of these studies provides detailed information on women superintendents' career moves, although they suggest that the vast majority began their careers as teachers and may have obtained their current post either through a direct path from teaching or counseling to line positions of principal, assistant superintendent and then superintendent, or through more specialized jobs such as those in special education, media, research, or federal programs. Some clues to the experiences of women in all three line administrative positions come from Paddock's (1977, 1981) study, which suggests that the career paths of these women are relatively short, not unlike those of comparable men. Unfortunately, none of these studies gives details on the career paths of women administrators in all three line positions, nor do they examine variations in career patterns among women in different types of administrative positions or with different attitudes toward their careers.

The present research examines variations in career patterns of superintendents, assistant and associate superintendents, and high school principals separately for those who entered the labor force before and after 1950. This year may be especially crucial because it marks a time when education expanded greatly, men entered the field in much greater numbers, and the representation of women in administration declined (Schmuck, 1980). In addition, students of organizational career patterns have noted the distinction between cosmopolitans and locals (Gouldner, 1957) or between those with a career orientation and a place orientation (Carlson, 1962). Thus, this study asks if women with different orientations toward occupational mobility tend to have different career patterns. It could be hypothesized that

those with a career orientation might be more likely than those with a place orientation to move through a number of different jobs, thus having a more complex career pattern. Finally, many women line administrators are in positions that appear to hold relatively little status (in terms of size of the district, number of people supervised, or salary). Others appear to have somewhat more rewards, although usually not at the level received by men. Are career patterns more complex for those in higher status posts, perhaps because they move through a greater variety of positions?

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Methodology

To answer these questions data were used from a questionnaire developed by Susan Paddock (1977, 1981) that was mailed to all women in the United States identified through state school directories or lists from state departments of education as holding a position of school superintendent, assistant or associate superintendent, or secondary school principal. A return rate of 56% was obtained, with no apparent biases apart from a tendency for superintendents and principals to return their schedules less often than assistant superintendents.¹ Comparisons of the demographic characteristics of the respondents in these groups with those obtained in other studies of the same population (e.g., Barron, 1977; Coatney, 1982; Costa, 1981; Frasher, Frasher, & Hardwick, 1982; Fansher & Buxton, 1984; McDade & Drake, 1982) indicate few differences; thus the returns probably provide a good representation of the population of women line administrators in the United States.²

To measure the career moves of the respondents, their occupation for each academic year since entering the labor force was coded. The codes included six types of administrative positions: superintendent; assistant superintendent; principal; assistant principal; staff administrative positions including the job titles of director, coordinator, and consultant; and other more marginal administrative posts including head teacher. The codes also included two categories of school building level, nonadministrative positions: specialized positions such as counselor or librarian, and classroom teacher. There were separate codes for three categories of extra-educational employment: paid employment outside education, attending graduate school during an entire academic year, and not working in the paid labor force.

The measure of the respondents' career orientation came from two questions in which the respondents were asked to choose either an alternative indicating a desire to pursue further career opportunities, or one indicating satisfaction with current position and no desire to pursue further career advances. Responses to these two items were combined to form a three-category measure with the first category including those who gave a place-oriented response to both questions (34% of the sample); the second, those who gave a career-oriented response to one question and place oriented to the other (45%); and the third, those who gave a career-oriented response to both questions (21%). As a validity check, responses on this measure were compared to other indicators of career orientation. The respondents differed significantly in the expected direction on a scale of 8 items regarding career orientation and in their future plans, with the career-oriented respondents most willing to move to another state to take a job.

The measure of the status of the respondents' current occupation was based on a multivariate analysis of three separate indices: the number of people they supervised, the size of the district in which they worked, and their annual salary (see Stockard, 1984 for details). Four status groups

were distinguished: a small, high-status group ($n=13$) having much higher average salaries than the other women and supervising many more people; a second group ($n=55$) with the lowest salaries, in the smallest districts, and supervising the fewest people; and two mid-ranked groups ($n=79$ and 27) with scores on the defining variables which were midway between those in the other groups.³

Analysis

To examine the respondents' career transitions, the data were arranged in a matrix which shows the probability of moving from one job classification to another in any given year. Log-linear analysis, a multivariate statistical procedure used with categorical data, was used to determine whether career patterns varied among those with different job titles, years of entry, status, or career orientation more than would be expected by chance. Possible differences in entry positions or in positions held outside of education were analyzed separately using a chi-square test. Details on these statistical results are available from the author and only summaries of the results are given here. The results were compared to those reported by Gaertner (1981), Carlson (1979), and Ortiz (1982).⁴

Results

Table 1 gives the transition probabilities for all of the respondents for whom data were available (45 superintendents, 106 assistant superintendents, and 112 principals). The entry probabilities show that 71% of the respondents entered the labor force as teachers. One-fourth first entered positions outside of education, usually in business or government. Most of these women then became teachers, but a few moved directly from their work outside of education to an administrative post. The marginal proportions show that over the years the most common job held by the respondents was teaching. Second most common were positions out of education, most often in some type of business or as a housewife. Slightly less than half of the job-years involved nonteaching positions in education.

Table 1
Transition Probabilities For the Entire Sample

Position held in year j	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	% of Total	N
Superintendent	.98	.01							.01	.03	204
Assistant superintendent	.02	.97	.01							.07	453
Principal	.01	.03	.92		.02			.01	.01	.14	950
Assistant principal			.18	.78	.03	.01				.06	386
Staff administrator	.01	.07	.04	.02	.82	.01		.01	.02	.11	777
Other administrator	.01	.07	.05	.05	.05	.73		.02	.02	.02	168
Counselor/ librarian			.02	.08	.04	.02	.82	.02		.03	191
Teacher			.03	.02	.03	.01	.01	.87	.03	.36	2,514
Working out of education		.01	.01		.02			.09	.87	.18	1,212
Entry	.005	.000	.000	.000	.020	.010	.005	.710	.250		6,855
											<u>263</u>

j=1929,.....,1975

Note. Probabilities less than .005 but greater than .001 are rounded to zero and are not included on the table

Diagonal values indicate the tendency to stay in a position. The only categories with diagonal values greater than .90 are the three final line positions used as the basis of the sample, perhaps indicating that once the respondents attained these positions they were unlikely to leave them. This was especially true for the superintendency, but least true for the principalship, which may be seen as a preliminary step to the superintendent's post. The positions in which respondents were least likely to stay were those of other administrative posts ($p = .73$) and assistant principal ($p = .78$). Both of these positions might best be characterized as stopping points on the way to other jobs.

Most of the other probabilities in the matrix fall below the diagonal. If we assume that the categories have a rough order, this would indicate that most moves for this sample involved attaining greater prestige and/or responsibilities. Virtually all the respondents went through teaching to reach their current position. From teaching they went in a variety of directions. Superintendents most often came from assistant superintendencies ($p = .02$). Assistant superintendents appeared to come from staff or other administrative jobs ($p = .07$) or from principalships ($p = .03$). Principals often held assistant principalships ($p = .18$) or, less often, staff ($p = .04$) and other administrative jobs ($p = .05$). The most common way the respondents attained assistant principalships was through the counselor or librarian role ($p = .08$) and other administrative jobs ($p = .05$). They attained staff administrative positions in a variety of ways: from other administrative jobs ($p = .05$), counselor or librarian jobs ($p = .04$), the assistant principal role ($p = .03$), or directly from a teaching position ($p = .03$).

Career Transitions by Title

When the career patterns of respondents in the three different job categories (superintendent, assistant superintendent, and principal) were examined, there were no significant differences in the type of positions they held when beginning their work careers. However, the multivariate analysis indicated that the three groups of

administrators followed different career paths in attaining line positions. The superintendents tended to move directly from teaching to a line position more often than assistant superintendents or principals, but less often from a position out of education to teaching. Additional analyses indicated that superintendents more often held business positions outside of education and were most likely to have experienced movement among the three line positions. Assistant superintendents were more likely to have held staff administrative positions and to have used these as a stepping stone to a line position, to have attended graduate school for an entire academic year, and to have been a housewife. Principals were more likely than the others to have been an assistant principal, counselor, or librarian, and to have spent slightly more time as a teacher. They also were more likely to have moved to a line position from an assistant principal slot and to have spent time as a housewife.

Career Transitions by Year Entered

Those who entered the labor market before 1950 (as early as 1929) and in 1950 or later (as late as 1975) tended to have different entry positions. The younger respondents more often began their careers in teaching positions or other jobs within education, while the older respondents more often first held jobs outside of education. While the multivariate analysis indicated that the career transitions differed for the older and younger groups, examination of the data indicated that this resulted from the tendency for the older group to stay in posts outside of education much longer than the younger respondents. Perhaps this difference indicates that experience outside of education was valued for older women administrators while younger women administrators were more often expected to have worked primarily in education. However, the difference could very well reflect the nature of the sample. Women who entered the labor force after 1950 but who detoured into fields other than education may simply need more time to gain the line administrative positions comparable older women have already attained. If this were the case, it would be

expected that in ten to fifteen years, women line administrators who entered the labor force between 1950 and 1975 would be just as likely as those who entered before 1950 to have work experience outside of education.

Career Orientations

Respondents with different career orientations had very similar career patterns with no significant differences in the positions in which they entered the labor force, the type of positions they held outside of education, or the moves made from one position to another. Those with different orientations did, however, hold different types of jobs during their careers. Those with a place orientation held teaching positions for fewer years. Those with a mixed orientation spent more years as a teacher, out of education, and in staff administrative positions. Those with a career orientation spent fewer years as staff administrators or out of education, more often served as counselors or librarians, and had attained the highest levels of education. Principals were overrepresented among those with a place orientation, assistant superintendents among those with a mixed orientation, and superintendents among those with a career orientation.

Career Moves by Status

Members of the four status groups also had similar career moves, but differed in the types of positions they held during their careers. Those in the highest status group spent proportionately more years in principal posts, but fewer as a teacher or outside of education. Those in the lowest status group had more years in the three line administrative posts and in jobs out of education, but fewer years as an assistant principal, in other staff administrative posts, or as a counselor or librarian. Those in the two middle ranking groups had proportionately more years in various lower level staff and administrative jobs, but fewer years in the superintendent and principal categories. In addition, there was a tendency for members of the four status groups to differ somewhat in the type of positions they held outside of education,

the most striking being a tendency for those in the highest status cluster to be most likely to have taken a year or more out for graduate school.

Discussion and Summary

The results of this study tend to support those using samples composed primarily of men (Carlson, 1979; Gaertner, 1981; Ortiz, 1982). These women administrators appear to have moved through relatively regular career paths: from staff jobs to the principal or assistant superintendent post, from the vice principal position to the principalship, and from the principalship or assistant superintendent's job to the role of superintendent. Differences in the career patterns of superintendents, assistant superintendents, and principals correspond to those suggested by the literature, with superintendents most likely to have experience in other line administrative posts, assistant superintendents in staff administrative positions, and principals in building jobs. Such transitions appear logical given the functions performed by people in each of these posts.

In contrast to the stated expectations, there were few differences in the career paths of older and younger administrators. Some differences appeared in the analyses of those in different status groupings and with different career orientations. As expected, those in the highest status cluster appeared to have somewhat more complex career paths, most often taking out a year to attend graduate school and spending time as a principal before becoming a superintendent. Those with the lowest salaries and smallest staffs, and working in the smallest districts were most likely to have spent years outside of education and to have moved directly to a line position from teaching with little experience in other administrative positions. This might be expected when the administrative positions are of such low status that they would require relatively little prior administrative experience.

The expected differences were not so apparent in the analysis of those with different orientations toward their careers. Instead, the respondents' current positions appeared to be a more important correlate:

superintendents were most often career oriented, assistant superintendents had a mixed orientation, and principals most often were place oriented. This might simply reflect the special nature of the superintendent's career, which usually does not include tenure and typically involves movement among districts (see Carlson, 1972). An important question for future research might involve the causal connections between career patterns and career orientations: To what extent does an administrator's career orientation influence his or her career paths and choices; or, conversely, to what extent is attitude toward one's career influenced by career experiences?

One noteworthy finding, not totally anticipated by the earlier literature, was the role of the counselor's job as a common transition between teaching and staff administrative posts or the vice principal position. (Only four of the 35 job years in the counselor-librarian category involved the librarian's position.) In their study of influences on the probability of moving from teaching to administration, Eberts and Stone (1982) noted that working outside of the classroom (e.g., as a librarian, counselor, speech therapist) actually reduced the chances of either a man or a woman becoming an administrator. Unfortunately, their analysis did not show the independent influence of being a counselor on the chances of gaining an administrative position and did not differentiate the types of administrative jobs which the subjects attained. In contrast, Gallant (1980), in a study of women holding vice principal positions in secondary schools, noted that a substantial number of these women had once held positions as guidance counselors.

Based on the current results, one could speculate that because it often involves semi-administrative tasks such as scheduling of students, the counselor's post might provide special experiences and visibility that could lead one to administrative jobs, especially those within schools, such as the vice principal or principal position. Counselors may be more likely than other nonteaching personnel to develop personal contacts with administrators who can aid their advancement. Because women and

men are about equally likely to become counselors (Schmuck, 1980, citing NEA, 1973), administrative advancement through the counselor position might also be particularly open to women. Each of these questions is worthy of further investigation.

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Footnotes

1. The 56% figure assumes that every person who did not return a questionnaire was a woman in one of the identified occupations. If not, Paddock notes that the sample may actually represent a larger percentage of women administrators. The sample used here is slightly larger than Paddock's because it includes respondents who returned schedules after her cut-off date for analysis. This does not appear to bias the sample in any way, except to include a slightly higher proportion of principals than does her analysis.
2. Because of missing data, it was impossible to reconstruct the entire job history for some of the respondents (6% of all the years coded). These intervening years were included in a residual code which was collapsed with the years out of education in most of the analyses.
3. Although information on these measures was not available for all respondents, this appears to have had only minimal effect on the analysis. Sufficient data on career patterns were available for 92% of the sample. A comparison of characteristics of those with career data and those lacking this information indicated only slightly more differences than would be expected by chance, the most noticeable of which was a tendency for those without data to be employed by county and statewide districts more often, and to see their future career moves as involving a return to teaching or some other downwardly mobile step. Complete information on the status variables was available for only

60% of the subjects, but the group with data again differed only slightly. Those without data on the measures tended to be older than the other respondents, to more often have only a bachelor's degree, to work in state departments, and to be employed as superintendents or assistant superintendents.

4. The earlier works involved samples of all administrators (and thus mainly men) within a relatively limited and specified organizational group—either a state or a set of districts within a state. The present sample involved the entire country and included not all administrators, but only those few women who have attained line positions. While the earlier studies involved a cross-sectional view of transitions within a given time period, the present study involved a retrospective view of how a group of women of varying ages attained their present posts. This method was necessary if we were to learn about their career patterns, for given the small proportion of all administrators, and especially those in line positions, who are women, it would be virtually impossible to conduct such a study in a cross-sectional manner within the limits of a smaller geographical area. Nevertheless, caution should be exercised in comparing the present results to earlier ones.

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