WOMEN LEADING EDUCATION ACROSS CONTINENTS AS A PERSISTENT LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Helen C. Sobehart[1], Esther Sui-Chu Ho[2], Patrick Mulvihill[3], Mustafa Celikten[4]
[1]Point Park University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA
[2]The Chinese University of Hong Kong
[3]Point Park University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA
[4]Erciyes University, Kayseri, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

This proposed study seizes upon a unique opportunity to elucidate the particular case of a professional learning network which has persisted since it was originally conceived in 2005, despite the fact that its members represent all continents across the globe except Antarctica. The idea for such a network was conceived when the principal investigator of the study was chair of the Women's Special Interest Group (SIG) of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), the national organization devoted to the scholarly understanding of educational leadership practices. Through a review of the literature and their own extended network of colleagues, the group realized that there was no place in the world where information about the status of women, as an underrepresented population in the highest levels of educational leadership, was studied or disseminated. With similar interest expressed by leaders of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the group took on the task of identifying scholars around the globe, both female and male, who study this issue in their respective regions. Key practitioners were also identified. Initial invitations

were sent to approximately 40 scholars and practitioners internationally. They were each asked to develop a scholarly paper about the status of women in educational leadership in their respective countries, at both basic and higher education levels. The participants understood the intent to create and sustain an ever increasing network of scholars and practitioners who are key experts on this topic around the world.

The network adopted the name of "Women Leading Education Across Continents" (WLE) and has since continued to exist through the present day, involving over 100 participants currently. The membership continues to include men and women of various ages, from graduate students through senior scholars, even emeriti, as well as some leading practitioners. This membership, therefore, provides a rich source of understanding of how and why an informal learning network that is not part of any formal organization continues to exist and thrive. The group has not only fostered three additional conferences (Germany, Greece and, in 2013, Ghana), but also is responsible for four direct book publications and numerous other publications and presentations.

The findings of this study benefit the WLE network itself but, more importantly, contribute to the body of literature regarding the persistence of informal learning communities. The layered contextual composition of this group provides a rich source of data related to the motivations and fulfillments of members of the network. The results of a survey of the group members provides not only demographic information, but information about why and how they have used their affiliation with the network and what motivates them to continue (or not). It adds to the research cited at the beginning of this section. As learning communities continue to grow, this study can assist founders and members to better understand those characteristics which may tend to enable the success of their networks.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study contributes to society, the field and to general knowledge. Because WLE's work is international in nature, and one of its major goals is to disseminate information, it benefits society by providing information through many venues to all societies represented within the group. For example, though the network is not financially supported by any formal organization, it has affiliations with UCEA, the American Association of School administrators (AASA) and the Commonwealth Council for Education and Management (CCEAM), a formal organization representing over 55 countries outside of United States. Each of those organizations, as well as others with which individual members have affiliations, provide multiple venues for sharing outcome information. These include both scholarly and practitioner publications, presentations, expert opinions given to the media, background for masters and doctoral research, among others.

This type of information is beneficial to people in general, especially policymakers, as they continue to be unaware of the underrepresented status of women in the highest levels of educational leadership. For example, if one were to ask acquaintances about the percentage of university presidents in United States or percentage of public school superintendents that are women, people rarely assume how low the real percentages are (approximately 26% for university presidents and 21% for superintendents, despite the fact that more women than men enter the wide end of the leadership funnel.) Therefore, this research can have potential impact across multiple audiences.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology chosen for this research is descriptive case study. As early as 1984, case study was characterized in the *Dictionary of Sociology,* "the detailed examination of a single example of the class of phenomenon, a case study cannot provide reliable information about the broader class, but it may be useful in the preliminary stages of an investigation since it provides hypotheses, which may be tested systematically with a larger number of cases." (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 1984).

Since then, case study methodology has met with criticism regarding its scientific basis. Flyvbjerg (2006) notes five common misunderstandings about this approach: 1. In general, theoretical (context–independent) knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical (context–dependent) knowledge; 2. One cannot generalize on the basis of an individual case; therefore, the case study cannot contribute to scientific development; 3. The case study is most useful for generating hypotheses in the first stage of a total research process, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building; 4. The case study contains a bias toward verification, that is, a tendency to confirm the researcher's preconceived notions; 5. It is often difficult to summarize and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of specific case studies.

However, the same author argues, "Context–dependent knowledge and experience are at the very heart of expert connectivity. Such knowledge and expertise also lie at the center of the case study as a research and teaching method or to put it more generally still, as a method of learning." (p. 222). So he counters the common misunderstandings with his own assertions: "1. Predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context–dependent knowledge is, therefore, more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals; 2. One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and a case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as a supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas ' the force of example' is underestimated; 3. The case study is useful for both generating and testing of hypotheses but is not limited

to these research activities alone; 4. The case study contains no greater bias toward verification of the researcher's preconceived notions than other methods of inquiry.

On the contrary, experience indicates that the case study contains a greater bias toward falsification of preconceived notions than toward verification; 5. It is correct that summarizing case studies is often difficult, especially as concerns case process. It is less correct as regards case outcomes. The problem in summarizing case studies, however, is due more often to the properties of the reality studied and to the case study as a research method. Often it is not desirable to summarize and generalize case studies. Good studies should be read as narratives in their entirety" (pp. 224-241). Such noted qualitative experts as Robert Stake (1995) corroborate this line of argument about the case study method. As an aspect of Grounded Theory approach, the case study helps to "generate theories that explain some aspect of how the social world works." (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006)

In this study, we use multiple data sources to enrich the description of the informal learning network, Women Leading Education Across Continents, as it has persisted for nearly a decade. Though a major component of the study is a survey completed by members of the WLE network with nearly a 50% response rate, the authors also draw experience and information from: four books published from conference papers; biographical research regarding some founding members; a video about the group›s work; a PowerPoint with music used at the end of the first conference that highlighted each contributor›s key point; one participant's photographs of women and children across the world; symbolic mementos from various conferences; and observation by three of the four authors who personally participated in two or three of the initial conferences. This rich context, as noted by Yin (1993), "produces a multilayered picture of the network which, whether or not it is generalizable, will foster further hypotheses and research about the persistence of informal learning networks." It enables the researchers to describe a «phenomenon of interest in the environment studied to draw information which was not obtainable from other methods (Noor, 2008). The findings section of this paper will focus heavily on outcomes of the survey. Nevertheless, it will also provide observations about the other data sources listed above. The analyses will then paint a total portrait of the events and milieu of the network, proposing hypotheses about networks regarding women and encouraging further research.

Participants in this study are members of the WLE network founded in 2005. A major component is a survey that was electronically distributed to the WLE listserv which contained approximately 100 email addresses at the time of distribution. Each potential participant in the survey received a notice of confidentiality ensuring that, among other things, any piece of information that might lead to identity would not be reported in the study. By clicking on a link to a Survey Monkey instrument, the survey participant gave permission to become part of the research. The survey consisted of 44 questions, some demographic in nature and the remainder designed to elicit information about

WLE participation through both multiple-choice and open ended questions. When a participant submitted a completed survey, his/her name was given a numerical code by one of the co-authors. Only coded information was used throughout the analysis.

Demographic information collected includes: age range; gender; country of birth; country of residence; current marital status; number of dependents of any type currently and during the career; religious affiliation, if any; employment status; highest level of education attained; discipline of the highest degree earned; number of years in service to education in either basic or higher education; current position title if employed; current country of employment; type of institution with which affiliated; if retired, title prior to retirement; whether positions were held in basic and/or higher education; title of highest position attained in basic or higher education; number of years in teaching capacity in higher education; highest academic rank attained; number of years in an administrative capacity; highest rank attained in administrative capacity; rate of success in applying for and obtaining positions; maximum number of employees who were direct reports; total number of employees in organizations or divisions that were led by participant; length of involvement with WLE. Participants were assured in the confidentiality notice that, in the analyses, should a demographic characteristic be so unique as to make that participant identifiable, then that item of analysis would not be reported.

The following information questions were asked with multiple-choice options for answers: how did you become aware of WLE; what motivated you to become involved with WLE; have you continued to be involved with WLE in any capacity; if you have continued, what is your motivation; if you have discontinued involvement what was your motivation. For the majority of these items, respondents could choose more than one option as well as check «other» to describe that reason. The remaining questions were open ended: how many WLE conferences have you attended; with approximately how many publications related to WLE have you been involved as an author/co-author; with approximately how many presentations related to WLE have you been involved as a presenter/co-presenter; in what other capacity have you been involved with WLE; if you said you did not feel part of the group, please say why; what impact, if any, do you perceive WLE has had in your sphere of influence; what impact, if any, do you perceive WLE has had in your state, country, and/or beyond; what purpose(s) do you perceive WLE serves.

Three final questions were asked that were open ended. Participants were told that their explicit responses would not be used in formal reporting. However, unidentifiable concepts from these responses are used in the analysis due to their rich contextual contribution. These questions were: if you had to make one or two recommendations to WLE to further the work, what would they be; if you had to make one or two recommendations to WLE to further the relationship network, what would they be; is there anything else you would like to add.

FINDINGS

Survey Findings

A brief review of the demographic information about respondents in Table 1 provides an interesting snapshot. Some aspects may not be surprising while others are more unique.

Overall, respondents have many years of service to some type of education, whether basic (preschool through secondary) or higher education (college/university), a median of 30 years. Interestingly, respondents were fairly equal in the number of years of service to basic versus higher education, 17 years each. It should be noted however that these responses are not mutually exclusive. Many of the respondents had years of service in both higher and basic education.

Over twice as many of those in higher education had spent their years in teaching than in handling the administration division. Participants were not specifically asked whether their choice to remain in higher education teaching was indeed a choice versus a failure to access positions in higher education administration. One might posit that the job of full tenured professor ranks more highly in the eyes of many academics than does that of a university president.

Three fourths of the respondents supported some type of dependent during their career. That dropped to approximately half at the current time. The fact that so many respondents had dependents during their career is in conflict with some research which suggests that having dependents makes high level career access and longevity more difficult for a woman. (Jesberger, 2013)

Almost all respondents participated in WLE conferences with a median of two out of the three that have been held thus far. 70% participated in one or more publications resulting from WLE work, while 12 respondents did not. The same was true for participation in WLE related presentations. This indicates a high level of involvement not just in WLE conferences but in subsequent publications and/or presentations. This question did not inquire whether participants wrote or made presentations about WLE related work in other venues, but anecdotal information and responses to open ended questions suggest that such efforts have been plentiful.

Since participants become involved at least one year prior to a conference through research and preparation of papers, involvement is measured as of one year prior to a given conference. Therefore, approximately 2/3 of respondents have been involved with the network for five years or more.

Regarding employment, almost 3/4 of responding members are employed at public institutions, whether basic or higher education. The remainder is employees of private

(religious or nonreligious) institutions, and professional associations. The majority are full-time employees across all age groups with the greatest number in the 50 to 69 age range. Only two respondents are part-time employees and four are retired. Though respondents represented only about 50% of the 100 member network, knowledge of persons in the entire network suggests that the relative percentages of employment status is true for the entire group.

In terms of the geographic breakdown, the majority of members represent countries that may be considered as more "westernized". Yet indeed every continent except Antarctica is represented but the group does have in its membership the two women who were the first all female team to traverse Antarctica. It is important to note that, though there is no single funding source for WLE activities, members actively pursue funding between one conference and the next to assure that the growing number of practitioners and scholars from organizations unable to support travel, especially from non-Western countries, have the opportunity to participate.

Interestingly, regarding religious affiliation, the group is roughly split in half in terms of traditional Christian versus combined non-Christian, non-religious, other or "prefer not to respond". Further analysis indicates that responses to attitudinal questions do not appear to be substantively different among Christians, versus those who are not, among motivations and perceptions regarding WLE.

Responses to the question about marital status are interesting since some research suggests it is difficult for women to remain in a committed relationship while pursuing a high-level career (Jesberger, 2012). So while approximately 40% of respondents are single because they were divorced, widowed or never married, 60% are married or in a committed relationship. While further study is needed, this suggests that the oft held assumption that women cannot have a marriage and strong career at the same time may not be true. An important corollary note is that most of the respondents supervised people and/or lead organizations at some point – and those groups were fairly large.

Finally, while the majority of respondents are over 50 years of age, almost 20% are below that age level, as young as the 20 to 29 range. Again, knowing the full range of WLE participants, there are indeed more members in the under 50 range than this respondent statistic represents. There has been an intentional effort to invite graduate students and younger professionals to the group, so that as much as humanly possible, the chain of research, practice and commitment continues through time and space.

Impact Findings

What impact, if any, do you perceive WLE has had in your sphere of influence? (Please define your sphere).

Sphere of influence ranges from an individual's department/organization to some generalized impact at a more regional or national level

General Comments
- Credibility amongst Peers/Organizations
- Academic Anchor (Scholarly Activities: Teaching/Research/Organizational Development)
- International Network
- Increased Visibility of Emerging Issues in Women/Minority Leadership (Individual/Organization/Regionally)
- Personal Awareness Fulfillment
- Advance Scholarship/Research (Individual/Organization)
- Support Academic & Professional Development
- Provide Vision & Expand Perspective
- Provide Opportunity to Mentor or be Mentored

Opportunity
- None cited

Challenges
- Sources of funding to support scholarly research and WLE mission

Connectors
- Conference, WLE Network, Parliament of the World Religions, BELMAS, CCEAM

What impact, if any, do you perceive WLE has had in your state, country, and/or beyond?

General Comments

Most perceived an impact existed at varying levels: organization, state, regional, national, international
- Glass ceiling is beginning to break in host country
- Network existence is becoming more visible

Opportunity
- Further develop reach within K-12 environment
- Further develop reach within national realm
- Promotion of WLE resources in additional languages

Challenges
- None cited

<u>Connectors</u>
• UCEA, AASA, AERA, UNESCO

The impact of the work accomplished through WLE is perceived to have impact at various levels. Those levels range from an individual to a department or organization to a regional, state, national or even international area.

Comments in general were positive about various types of impact. These included: scholarly and other professional improvements; providing mentorships or receiving mentoring; increasing the visibility of emerging issues; enhancing credibility among peers and other organizations; personal fulfillment; providing vision and expanded perspective; and helping to break the glass ceiling, among others.

Respondents cited opportunities such as furthering the reach of WLE in a variety of ways including the promotion of WLE resources in additional languages. The main challenge noted was the constant need to secure funding to support scholarly research and travel, especially for those whose institutions cannot afford to support their endeavors.

Respondents cited many connections already established through the WLE network. These included professional educational associations that represent well over 60 countries across the globe. They also cite connections with such organizations as United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM), the British Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society (BELMAS), and the Parliament of the World's Religions. So overall it appears that survey respondents feel about WLE network has made important connections across continents.

Qualitative Findings

It is interesting to note that the original motivations to join are tilted slightly towards professional factors, while motivations to stay are more relational in nature, both in terms of higher percentages and motivations cited. Few members have discontinued their relationship, most of those for reasons beyond their control, though 1% noted not having motivations fulfilled.

Collectively, these demographic characteristics demonstrate that, while there is some overrepresentation in the group in terms of age, geography and religious affiliation, the WLE network nevertheless represents a diverse population across a variety of demographic characteristics. It also illuminates the topic of motivation to stay (which tends to be more relational/psycho-social) or go (which tends to be for factors beyond control, though several comments about feeling "not part of the group" or "not valued as a practitioner" are noteworthy). Thus is the importance of this case study as an elucidation of why and how an informal learning network persists despite time, space and a myriad of demographic variations.

Observational Findings and Artifacts

While the findings of the survey portion of the study are important, it is also vital to understand context via description of other data sources that can help to paint a picture of the founding and continuation of the WLE network. Given the culture rich description of learning organizations in the quotes at the beginning of this paper, we pay specific attention to aspects of culture of the WLE organization. According to Schwahn, "Every organization has culture. It may be good or it may be bad, but there will be culture". Culture is demonstrated through such elements as heroes and heroines, symbols, rituals, ceremonies, imagery, music, documents and other artifacts. Even informal learning networks have culture, by design and/or by happenstance (Schwahn, 2006).

Senge himself notes that "The key to 'seeing the whole' is developing the capacity not only to suspend our assumptions but to 'redirect' our awareness toward the generative process that lies behind what we see." (2005, p. 42) "You just can't analyze such systems from the outside to get to the root causes of things – you have to feel them from within." (p. 54).

Much of the original design of what became the WLE network was intentional. Even the letter of invitation that was sent to the original participants went beyond just promoting a professional meeting, though that indeed was important, to a kind of moral imperative. A phrase from that original letter emphasizes this point, "to further the cause [of women] across the globe". (Sobehart Letter, 2007). Schwahn advises that organizations need to create their ideal culture. (2006) Hesselbein might argue that the persistence of WLE is due to the fact that its culture was founded upon a vision and core set of guiding principles from which they have not strayed. (2002)

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The definitions of a learning organization as described in the opening quote of this paper connote far more than typical organizational terminology. There are many words that convey emotion and relationships: nurture, aspiration set free, love-led, obsessed, symbolic. These terms go beyond those typically found when describing learning communities. For example, the factors cited in the research at the beginning of this paper, conducted by the National College for School Leadership in the UK, are somewhat more traditional: shared values and vision; collective responsibility; collaboration focused on learning; professional learning; reflective professional inquiry; openness, networks and partnerships; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect and support; optimizing resources and structures; promoting professional learning; evaluating and sustaining; and leading and managing. While some of these characteristics do convey the relational aspect of learning organizations, they do not excite the reader as much as the words noted in the opening quote. In either case, they do not describe how a community develops and maintains these behaviors and beliefs.

Certainly some findings from the WLE survey contain typical descriptions associated with a learning community, such as, "increasing my professional opportunities". However, there are words in the survey that convey a power similar to that conveyed in the opening quote of this paper. The end of the survey asked participants for responses to three questions: if you had to make one or two recommendations to WLE to further the work, what would they be; if you had to make one or two recommendations to WLE to further the relationship network, what would they be; and is there anything else you would like to add?

Respondents were told that these questions would not be analyzed systematically, nor will they be. Nevertheless there are striking words contained in their responses to those questions. Some of those include: amazing; opened my eyes; admirable; excited; welcoming; fighting for social justice; we are not alone; thoughts and lives touched; struggle with the same barriers; profound impact on the way to see and think about the world; born to a new self; turning point; impactful; journey out of a metaphorical dark place; a gift; encouraging to break the glass ceiling, if just a small bit; stimulate; no longer a "free agent" with the no alliance or anchor; our spirits continue to fan the flames of change worldwide; allowing women to rejuvenate themselves – physically, spiritually, socially and emotionally; robust interrogation of policies regarding inequity; support; friendship; privilege to connect; fond reflection; fuel for the flame of social justice and to continue to strengthen it; space to reflect on lives and careers; camaraderie on a global scale; spanning artificial boundaries; serves purposes of which we are not yet aware; bringing these goals to women from places where being a woman is still considered a sin; enriching life immeasurably; energized; blessing; energy that flows and is so powerful that nothing can break it; moral imperatives; the chance to give as much as I am able and to receive as much as I can let in. The characteristics and word choice of those who responded to the survey seem to make visible a "spiritual synergy" which exists within the WLE network.

There were also powerful comments to serve as a caution. Some expressed concerns about such issues as inequality between practitioners and researchers and the need to truly embrace diverse opinions and experiences. The words "exclusive" and "cliquish" appeared. Such things foreshadow emotional and relational issues that can cause this network to disengage if they are not addressed in a serious and timely manner. These types of comments were far fewer than those above, but equally as important. They both convey the notion that *an understanding of the relational and sometimes intangible bonds of being part of a community, especially a community dedicated to women and social justice, may be the most important contribution that this descriptive study of WLE can make.* One other statement from the survey supports this idea, "it [WLE] brings to consciousness what has been in a dormant stage for eons, the powerful and indisputable role women have played in society since the onset of the human race. This awakening is what we must spread to the rest of the world".

The previous quote is a reminder of a body of leadership literature which may truly light the path of understanding why learning organizations are for. The role of women who formed, maintained and persisted powerfully beyond themselves are to be seen in creating the learning organization. Although this may seem to some as an unusual lens by which to interpret these findings, those associated with issues of transcendental leadership and followership see it as a very viable path. For example Thompson (2000) notes that "traditional scientific methods sometimes use microscopes to search for something that can only be grasped in panorama. Our challenge is to make visible those traits that are hidden in plain sight". Sanders and his colleagues (2003) support this notion and when they argue that "combining discussions of transactional, transformational and transcendental leadership [and followership] allows leaders to become less concerned about the constraining realities of the external environment and more concerned about an internal development that transcends realities as defined by the environment". (Sanders, Hopkins, Gercy, 2003)

The panorama that has been painted of the WLE network does indeed demonstrate the complex relationship among transactional, transformational and transcendental qualities. Sanders et al (2003) further argues the importance of this understanding when he says "although these [traditional] strategies have had tremendous positive impact on organizational development and leadership effectiveness, they have not fully addressed the growing spiritual demands of our changing society." Nevertheless, Fry (2003) concurs when he says that "people with a sense of calling and membership will become attached, loyal to, and want to stay in organizations that have cultures based on values and altruistic love… in a very real sense, spiritual leadership [and followership] is, I believe, like a nuclear reactor in that it generates the fusion necessary to power the learning organizations of the new millennium." (Fry, 2003) The addition of "follower" in reference to "leader" comes from a long time colleague and Oxford University don that "without followers there can be no leaders" – and thus no community.

Indeed, Fry (2003) lists the characteristics of those who would fuel the "learning organization of the new millennium": broad appeal to key stakeholders; defines the destination and journey; reflects high ideals; encourages hope/faith; establishes a standard of excellence; forgiveness; kindness; integrity; empathy/compassion; honesty; patience; courage; trust/loyalty; humility; fun; endurance; perseverance; do what it takes; stretch goals; expectation of reward/victory. These words bear a striking resemblance to those used by WLE survey respondents.

Other enlightened researchers in the field of learning communities reach similar conclusions about characteristics and principles that foster the persistence of true transcendental organizations. Wheatly (2002) cites these: life is uncertain; life is cyclical; meaning motivates people; service brings us joy; courage comes from our hearts; we are interconnected to all life; we can rely on human goodness; we need

peace of mind and acceptance. They too echo the qualities cited by WLE respondents and seen in the WLE culture.

Furthermore, she asserts that spirituality has always been intertwined with leadership. One such example is the phenomena of the "strange attractor". Rooted within nanophysics, researchers have found that for an unknown reason the "strange attractor" begins to attract and organize chaotic particles into magnificent patterns. (Wheatley, 2000) A great leader is indeed a "strange attractor" who draws in those around her to make a more beautiful system out of disparate and often negative energy. And who might be an example of such a strange attractor, of someone who helps bind others together to stay true to a common vision?

We strongly recommend further descriptive studies of other informal learning networks related to women to better see components of the picture of a successful, persistent learning network. These descriptive studies may lead to additional or even contradictory findings – such is the nature of research. However, the illumination of the case of WLE conveys the strong message that the intentionality of the spirit and the flame do matter.

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