CHAPTER 1

A GLANCE AT THE EVOLUTION OF THE SUPERINTENDENCY

Many studies show that a large majority of super-intendents are white males. The 1992 ten-year study confirms this is still true; only a small per-centage of the nation's superintendents are women or members of a racial or ethnic minority group.

> —T. *Glass*, The 1992 Study of the
> American School Superintendency

Few superintendents of K–12 public school districts in the United States are women, although many women have leadership positions in schools. Traditionally the superintendency has been held by white males. Pavan (1985) found that from 1970 through 1984, women superintendents accounted for 3.3 percent. Shakeshaft (1989) shows figures for female district superin-tendents that range from 1.6 percent in 1928 to 3.0 percent in 1985. Feistritzer (1988) reports a nationwide study con-ducted in 1987 revealing that 96 percent of public school superintendents were men. Even more recent statistics

show only a slight increase with women superintendents at 5.5 percent in 1990 (Blount, 1993), climbing to 7.1 percent in 1993 (Montenegro, 1993). *The 1992 Study of the American School Superintendency*, cited in the epigraph above, tells us that of the more than 4 million professional educators in the United States, fewer than 1,000 women guide the 15,000 school districts in executive leadership positions (p. 9).

These contemporary figures are curious. Even though the superintendency has undergone significant changes over the past half century, it is clear that the public image of the superintendent has not altered to the same degree. A brief look at how selected writers have described the superintendency over the years underscores these perceptions.

SUPERINTENDENTS IN RETROSPECT

There is no doubt that once upon a time the superintendent was conceived of in distinctly male terms. In the 1950s and 1960s for instance, the "modern" superintendent was likened to the new executive in peacetime America. Although not used to describe a superintendent of schools, such epithets as "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" or the "Organization Man"* characterized the image he presented to the public. Still a somewhat new profession, the superintendency borrowed principles of action from business, government, and social service. Indeed, Spalding (1954) writes of the superintendent as one whose "main responsibility is to impart [democratic] qualities to a school system and to preserve them for it" (p. 53). Echoing the moral duties of the superintendent, Wilson (1960) views the school leader as second only to the minister in representing and upholding the community's values, one of which was to pacify "the female member [of the board] [with] a dozen long-stemmed

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*The term comes from William H. Whyte's book *The Organization Man*, 1956.

roses" (p. 52). Such intended levity aside, however, these postwar writers regularly invoked images of warrior and priest in the description of the superintendency. Without doubt, he was a symbolic leader whose charismatic qualities placed him on a pedestal. Clabaugh put it succinctly: "The American school superintendent accepts the fact that his school system is . . . the lengthened shadow of himself" (1966, p. 1).

Gradually, though, as the position became the object of more academic interest and as more courses at universities were developed to prepare potential administrators for the superintendency, the role and duties of the superintendent became refocused to accommodate a rapidly expanding and technologically advancing society. Greater emphasis was placed on the executive's ability to delegate responsibility to an administrative team. The fast growth of the student population following World War II and the consolidation of small districts into large ones required the school leader to be supported by specialized assistants (Fensch and Wilson, 1964). Nevertheless, he was still firmly under the influence of the earlier "cult of efficiency" that had transformed the position from one of scholar-educator to businessman (Callahan, 1962). As citizens and parents demanded more specialized services and curricular offerings in the public schools, superintendents were expected to manage their districts cost-effectively. At the time, good district leadership was largely synonymous with male-associated financial skills and bureaucratic control.

By 1968, the American Association of School Administrators and the National School Boards Association had published the pamphlet *Selecting a School Superintendent* which gave clear indications to board members of what they should be looking for in the main administrator. Acknowledging the increasing complexity of the occupation, the authors emphasized the expanding functions of a superintendent to include planning and evaluation; organization; management of personnel, business, buildings, and auxiliary services; provision of information and advice to

the community; and coordination of the entire school sys-
tem (p. 6). However, the rhetoric plainly reinforced the older,
rather grandiose image of the superintendent and reaffirmed
his maleness. Similes used in the document compare super-
intendents to "surgeons, artists or judges" (p. 3) and to "pio-
neers on a great frontier blazing trails" (p. 2).

Carlson (1972) openly acknowledges that it is a male
occupation. Citing Morris (1957), he claims that in prepara-
tion for the superintendency "the chances of movement to
administrative posts is seven to ten times greater for men
[than for women]" (p. 8). Carlson found that while there
were many desirable qualities in both kinds of superinten-
dent as he defined them—the career-bound superintendent
characterized by his mobility and the place-bound superin-
tendent who moved into the position from inside—there
was a subtle favoring of the former. Indeed, his assertion
that a career-bound superintendent was more likely to
embrace innovation and to develop the school system than
the place-bound superintendent virtually established in the
public mind the image of an educationally effective super-
intendent as a man who can move wherever his employ-
ment takes him.

Shortly after this time, the influence of Title IX of the
Education Amendments of 1972 found its way into the lit-
erature. For instance, board members were advised to take
careful note of the "existence of federal guidelines concern-
ing the promotion of women and minorities" (p. 7) in the
1979 joint publication of the American Association of
School Administrators and the National School Boards
Association, *Selecting a Superintendent*. Yet, the resulting
attention to the language used to refer to a superintendent
was prompted by legal considerations rather than by a desire
to reconceptualize the position. Nevertheless, from then
on, some of the literature pays more explicit attention to the
gender neutrality of a superintendent, implying that the
administrative leader of schools could be male or female.

Still, while there was lip service paid to the idea of a
woman in certain superintendencies, Cuban's (1976) defi-

nition of the role of big-city superintendents suggested otherwise. From a historical study of the occupation over the last century and a focus on three urban school "chiefs" (an especially male image), he concluded that a superintendent's leadership can be characterized by three ideal types: the teacher-scholar, the chief administrator, and the negotiator-statesman. Not fundamentally gender related, in and of themselves, these "types," nevertheless, remain firmly male in Cuban's language. Even when he is not speaking specifically of the three men in his study, he repeatedly generalizes superintendents as "schoolmen," and in his conclusion he admits that "both the public and the profession seem to need *heroic* leaders" [my italics] (p. 171). Again, although the competencies for the position could be acquired by a man or a woman, the image of the superintendent was still male.

As more and more diverse literature on the superintendency began to appear, yet another aspect of the position cemented its association with men. The political implications of the post, denied for so long, began to be openly acknowledged. Lutz and Iannaccone (1978), for instance, developed the dissatisfaction theory of democracy to explain the particular vulnerability of a superintendent when the school board that appointed him is replaced over time by different members of the community who do not share the same values as the original ones. More often than not he loses his job. Much attention was given to the inherently conflictual dimension of the position. Boyd (1974) emphasized the need for superintendents' increased political sensitivity and their acquisition of skills and attitudes to provide for successful conflict resolution. Blumberg (1985), echoing Boyd (1974) and Cuban (1976), further developed the notion of superintendent as "educational statesman" or "political strategist," or a combination of both. Arguing that a superintendent is increasingly caught up both in federal and in state politics, not to mention local, he goes so far as to say that "without doubt, there is agreement that effective performance and, probably, survival requires of the

superintendent a shrewd sense of political imperatives"
(p. 54). Largely because high politics was not traditionally
open to them, few women administrators of the time were
expected to enter the political fray of the superintendency.
Certainly the political arena always has been, and still is, an
overwhelmingly male one.

In addition, the conflictual nature of the superinten-
dency, particularly as Blumberg (1985) represented it, also
would have attracted only those administrators experienced
at dealing with discord. Describing the politics of a super-
intendency as a game of winning and losing in "the arena of
human affairs," Blumberg not only states that one of his
male respondents found it "fun," but he also suggests that
"to be politically shrewd leaves little room for an open dis-
play of honesty" (p. 68). Drawing on Burlingame (1981) who
argued that the best tactics a superintendent should use to
retain power include deliberate mystification, cover-up, and
tactical rules, Blumberg even claims that at times a super-
intendent's ethical values should be subordinated to the
"higher goal of keeping the system in balance and peace-
ful" (p. 68), all of which reinforced an image of constant
antagonism, political manoeuvering, and underhandedness.
No doubt many women and men were similarly repelled
by this description.

Indeed, much of the work on the superintendency in
the sixties and seventies, and into the eighties, developed
the notion of a superintendent defined by the strife he
encountered. Along with the political friction mentioned
earlier which was external to the organization, after collec-
tive bargaining was introduced, there was also attention
paid to the internal antagonism within the organization.
But Crowson (1987) argues that the little research that was
done did not provide a coherent picture of the role. Instead,
he claims that it adds up to a puzzlement. Not only are
some superintendents not beset by constant dissension, for
instance, some superintendents, contrary to popular belief,
also spend "little time interacting with their boards of edu-
cation" (p. 59). Although there seems to be some agreement

in the literature on the historical development of the super-
intendency, it is clear that widely varying demographic fac-
tors—location and size of school district; socioeconomic,
ethnic, and cultural makeup of community; and local polit-
ical features of the region—have the greatest effect on the
kind of role the superintendent plays.

Furthermore, against the background of school reform
movements begun in the eighties, there is a slowly growing
interest in understanding the superintendent's relationship
to instructional improvement. As in the distant past, there
is a focus on the superintendent's educational leadership.
Moreover, precisely because the superintendency is becom-
ing the center of much more research than in the past, per-
ceptions of the position continue to evolve. Currently there
are investigations into the role of superintendent as a leader
who guides a school district from "an existing state to a
preferred one" (Hord, 1993, p. 2). Hord's overview of earlier
research indicates that although we know a good deal about
the dynamics between a superintendent and the school
board, and we know about the desirability of a superinten-
dent's goal setting and strategic planning, we still know lit-
tle about superintendent effectiveness in school reform
issues, particularly as it relates to student outcomes. Several
years ago Cuban (1984) pointed out that deficiency. He
argued that due to the relative absence of research in the
area "no facts . . . exist on superintendent behaviors that
cause district improvement" (p. 146).

Not surprisingly then, some attention is being paid to
the superintendent as instructional leader (Glass, 1993b;
Murphy and Hallinger, 1986; Myers 1992; Paulu, 1989).
Tying in the previous emphasis on the political aspect of
the position, Cuban (1988) claimed that in the past the
superintendent's instructional role has been eclipsed by his
managerial one, but that a crucial intersection between the
two occurs when the superintendent uses political skills to
achieve educational goals. The reality is that without
enough political savvy, a superintendent is unlikely to be
able either to garner the necessary resources or to command

sufficient community support to bring about reform.

Interestingly, recent studies of exemplary superintendents indicate that such leaders are working in districts where there is "a strong emphasis on instructional leadership" (Glass, 1993c, p. 67). The public concern over falling test scores and graduates' poor job skills has forced more attention on the superintendent's participation in efforts to improve instruction. Reporting another study of the skills of effective superintendents, Glass states that the most important performance areas or goals are environment and curriculum, both of which are in the public scrutiny during current restructuring and reform efforts (Glass, 1993a). However, we still know relatively little about the role of a superintendent or the actions he or she "might take in order to develop curricula and provide instructional models" (p.25). Without doubt, there is a consistent call for further research on the superintendency in the current literature which would contribute to a better understanding of the superintendent as instructional leader.

Notwithstanding the above, there has been a recent attempt to provide a specific set of guidelines concerning the expectations a board of directors should have for a contemporary superintendent. These were published by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) in the 1993 pamphlet, *Professional Standards for the Superintendency*. The standards include the following: (1) leadership and district culture, (2) policy and governance, (3) communications and community relations, (4) organizational management, (5) curriculum planning and development, (6) instructional management, (7) human resources management, and (8) values and ethics of leadership. Compared to the preceding AASA documents, this publication shows a marked change in the terms associated with the superintendent. Described as flexible, creative, and visionary, superintendents are also to be collaborative leaders who will need to deal "with a growing trend toward school-based management and decision-making as school districts become increasingly decentralized and local

schools become more autonomous" (p. 14). These trends are almost the complete reverse of the earlier centralizing ones, influenced by postwar consolidation of districts and an accent on charismatic, authoritative school management. Reflective of a much more unpredictable community environment, mention of the superintendent as "choreographer" or "orchestrator" (Crowson, 1987) of district restructuring efforts holds promise for the less traditional administrator. It suggests that a different set of personal characteristics from those sought in the past are needed for the superintendent of the present. Indeed, Susan Moore Johnson (1993) believes that superintendents today would be "well served with a new model of leadership" (p. 29). Arguing that the current pressure for superintendents to have a vision, whether it is one that has been developed individually by the executive or one that has been collaboratively designed, makes superintendents even more vulnerable than in the past. Johnson advocates an approach to leadership that is more educationally informed and less business oriented.

Therefore, closely connected to the establishment of the above standards is a contemporary concern with academic preparation and practical training programs for superintendents and aspirants (Carter, 1993; Carter and Glass, 1993; Glass, 1993b; Hoyle, 1989; Loredo and Carter, 1993; Loredo, Harris, and Carter, 1993; Miskel, 1990; Murphy and Hallinger, 1989). Indeed, Hoyle and Oates (1994) propose using the AASA professional standards as the basis of a collaborative staff development thrust, to iron out some of the endemic difficulties between superintendents and their boards. They believe the standards will improve the superintendency in three areas: (1) providing a clearer focus for the selection, preparation, and licensure of superintendents; (2) promoting greater respect for the position of superintendent; and (3) creating board members who are better informed about the role and responsibilities of superintendents (p. 216). All in all, far greater attention is being paid today to what the superintendent does on the job, perceived as much more miscellaneous than in the past. Correspondingly, studies on

how to train him or her to do the job most effectively are multiplying. Gone, from the literature at least, is any reference to the desirability of a stereotypical male in the position. Instead, boards are encouraged to seek the person who would be best able to respond to the current local and national challenges. Despite Hord's (1993) lament that "the art of politics has taken precedence over the craft of instruction in the superintendency" (p. 4), it seems obvious that both elements of the position are vital to the improvement of learning in contemporary public schools.

WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?

Accordingly, in light of changing emphases on the position found in the literature on the superintendency, one is encouraged to believe that it is a position that for some years has not been associated with men only. Since the mid-eighties at least, the literature has used inclusive language and has paid attention to describing superintendents as either men or women. The question is: Where are the women? The teaching profession itself is still heavily populated by women. Since the turn of this century, women have dominated the teaching ranks at all levels (Tyack and Hansot, 1982). Recent nationwide surveys of numbers of women teachers show no significant changes, with figures ranging from 87 percent at the elementary level and 57 percent at the middle level to 52 percent at the secondary level (Bell and Chase, 1993).

However, in the middle management level of principals and assistant principals, and increasingly at the central office level, there are growing numbers of women. Quoting from the 1992 publication by the American Association of School Administrators, *Women and Minorities in School Administration: Facts and Figures 1989–1990*, Restine (1993) reports that women account for 20.6 percent of assistant superintendencies nationwide and 27 percent of principalships (p. 17).

Are women administrators seeking the superintendency? I have reason to believe that there are certainly more women who would like to have the job than the figures reflect. Over the past 20 years, significant increases of women in doctoral programs in educational administration suggest that more women aspire to the superintendency now than ever before. Pavan (1985), for instance, reports a 15 percent increase in the number of superintendent certificates awarded to women between 1970 and 1984 in a Pennsylvania study. Shakeshaft (1989) found that by the mid-1980s women accounted for 50 percent or more of the candidates enrolled in doctoral programs in educational administration throughout the country. In Washington State, a recent survey of qualified female members of the Washington State Administrators Association who subscribe to the statewide vacancy listing sheet, identified approximately 25 women who described themselves as "actively seeking a superintendency," and another 25 who described the superintendency or assistant superintendency as their "desired position" (G. Sharratt, personal communication, April 23, 1993).

Hence, despite a demonstrated interest in the position, which is revealed in such surveys and through an increase of women candidates for the superintendency in university training programs and internships throughout the country over the past two decades, numbers of women superintendents remain consistently small (Ortiz and Marshall, 1988; Shakeshaft, 1989). How is it that women have been unsuccessful in realizing their aspirations?

No one answer is satisfactory. There are such complexities inherent in the social institution of educational administration that interdependent theories need to be constructed. The feminist underpinnings of my work need restating at the outset. A feminist perspective is one that recognizes that there are social inequalities which rest on gender differences. I believe that all feminist research is guided by a desire to see an end of "social arrangements which lead women to be 'other than,' less than, put down, and put upon" (Kenway

and Modra, 1992, p. 139). Consistent with the views expressed in the Introduction, feminist inquiry has lead me to consider how the established ways of doing and being, which have been valued unquestioned for too long, disadvantage women. Feminist scholarship advocates change that brings about a more gender-equitable distribution of influential positions like the superintendency so that nontraditional and alternative strategies for educational leadership can be identified and examined critically for their worth, rather than treated as suspicious.

Consequently, a very interesting picture of the institution of educational administration emerges in this study through the lens of feminist poststructuralism. As will be explained more fully in the next chapter, this theory provides some insight into the experiences of the participants and helps to explain why there are so few women in the superintendency. Moreover, as further studies are conducted and new theories are developed, I sense that this approach, in its provision of spaces for other interpretations, will allow the interweaving of various theories.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In this first chapter, I have provided an overall context for the study by looking at the superintendency. Both the public image of a superintendent, gained through the literature, and the educational administrator's *insider's* perceptions of the position, revealed in the data, are important for a full understanding of how the superintendency is popularly represented.

Chapter 2 further elaborates the specific theory chosen to frame the study: feminist poststructuralism. I consider, in some depth, my interpretation of how feminist theory has intersected poststructuralism to form a theory that is different from both its components.

The data from the interviews are analyzed in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6. The narrative covers the different discourses

within which women aspiring to the superintendency find themselves positioned. Documents providing background data have also been used. These include 50 *Announcements of Vacancies* published in the home state of the participants. Furnishing written descriptions of districts, information about challenges of particular superintendencies, and desired personal and professional qualifications for the position, these documents verify the impressions of the participants.

The analysis of the data includes a discussion in chapter 3 of what it means to be qualified for the superintendency. Beliefs about academic degrees and certification expected for the job are examined from the participants' perspectives and from the perceived perspectives of those within the dominant discourse who have power to influence the hiring of a superintendent. So, too, are the kinds of on-the-job prior training a candidate is required to have. In addition, the chapter focuses on the importance of networking and the sponsorship that a candidate needs to gain access to the interview process.

Chapter 4 looks at how women administrators operate within the working context of educational administration. The chapter considers recurring themes in the discussion on work environments, including: administrative styles, support groups, and sexual issues in the workplace. In addition, the same issues are discussed in relation to the aspirant's perceived suitability for the job of superintendent.

How personal contexts further influence the lives of women aspiring to be superintendent is the focus of chapter 5. Particular attention is paid to the conflicting demands that are made on women who combine their worlds of educational administration with their worlds at home. The discourses of partnering, mothering, and homemaking are examined for potential sources of contradiction with the discourse of educational administration.

Chapter 6 then deals with the approaches to leadership the women in this study have developed. Particularly focused on the relational aspects of administration, the women discuss their own individual range of strategies. The

specific strengths, skills, and beliefs about leadership found in the data are examined. These empowering approaches to school administration are seen in the context of providing student- and instruction-focused possibilities for administrative restructuring.

Chapter 7 builds on chapter 6 by exploring the evolution of leadership behaviors and attitudes from a feminist perspective. Grounded in the data throughout the narrative are a number of assumptions about what a leader, such as a superintendent, says and does. Therefore, the overview of some of the established approaches to leadership seen from a feminist perspective in this chapter helps provide some explanation for the dissonance experienced by many of the participants between who they are and what was expected of them.

Finally, chapter 8 presents conclusions based on the research and discusses some implications for reformed practices within educational administration to provide for the possibility of a more equitable distribution of future superintendencies. On the whole, the findings are encouraging, both to those women currently aspiring to the superintendency and to those thinking of becoming trained. From my point of view, if women such as those in the study manage to reach the superintendency, the outlook for the improvement of student learning looks excellent. Combining a focus on what is best for the children through years of classroom interaction and a wealth of expertise in instructional areas such as curriculum, special education, and program development, women superintendents, like many of the women in this book who aspire to the position, would give us good reason to hope for significant change in the future.