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Comments

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MARGARET GROGAN

The Short Tenure of a Woman Superintendent: A Clash of Gender and Politics¹

Abstract: This article reports the two-year tenure of a woman superintendent in a small southern city. Placed against the background of local community politics and school district politics it shows that women in the superintendency still face issues of gender stereotyping that influence the way they are perceived as leaders of school systems. A feminist poststructuralist framework is used to understand how the various subject positions available to women collide with the discourse of the superintendency. It is recommended that women leaders resist the images that have been traditionally reserved for them and begin to reinvent the superintendency on their own terms.

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or someone else.

—Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*

A few years ago, in a small southern city, the headlines in daily and weekly newspapers proclaimed the arrival of a new superintendent—the first woman to hold the position. “Teeter² nothing short of super, associates say” (*The Bradford Chronicle*, 8/22, Year 1,³ A1). “Schools’ chief sees

challenge ahead. Ability to encourage community involvement cited in selection” (*The Bradford Chronicle*, 8/17, Year 1, A1). In the latter article, a school board member is quoted as saying “She’s a bridge builder, . . . she seems like a person who can really reach out to all segments of the community in Bradford” (A1). Another school board member says, “I see her as bringing a vitality and energy and vision to the system right now that will make positive things happen” (A7).

Dr. Joan Teeter, a seasoned superintendent with several years experience as a superintendent in another district, became superintendent of Bradford in the fall of Year 1. She lasted until the summer of Year 2. In many ways, her story is not a remarkable story. The average tenure of a superintendent in the United States is five to six years (Glass, 1992; Hodgkinson and Montenegro, 1999). Superintendents are caught up in external and internal forces over which they have little control. As Susan Moore Johnson (1996) argues “the social and political environment in which schools operate is dynamic, even turbulent. . . . School districts are not freestanding, self-sufficient organizations” (p. 273). Carter and Cunningham (1997) call it a politicized superintendency. They situate the superintendent amidst great controversy. “More people are demanding that schools do more things than ever before in the history of American education. If the typical problem with the school board is micromanagement, the problem with those outside the school division is hyperinterest and hypercriticism” (p. 39). Conflict surrounds the superintendent. Cuban (1985) sums it up by stating “from the early 19th century to the present, conflict in the superintendency has always stemmed from organizational politics” (p. 30). He clarifies his comments in a later work: “Positioned between what state and local school boards direct, what parents expect, what teachers and principals need (and these differ), and what students want, superintendents live and breathe conflict” (Cuban 1988, p. 139, parentheses in the original).

Given the unpredictability of the position it is not surprising that many superintendents do not remain in office very long. However, what is unusual in this case is that Joan Teeter was known for her relationship building. She was hired because she had, in her previous position, “used her genial nature to build bridges between the schools and parents and the business community” (*The Bradford Chronicle*, 8/22, Year 1, A1). This is a study of what happens when a community hires a superintendent who appears to have the ability to manage diverse groups of stakeholders but who fails. Despite the fact that only 12 percent of the nation’s superintendents are women (Hodgkinson and Montenegro 1999, p. 8), this community welcomed a woman. No public comment drew attention to the gender of the superintendent other than to acknowledge that she was the first woman

¹Accepted under the editorship of Paula Short

²A pseudonym. Consistent with qualitative methodology, some of the personal details and geographic locations have been changed to protect the identity of the superintendent and community.

³The references to newspaper documents have been disguised by fictitious names, and instead of the actual year, Year 1 and Year 2 will be used to indicate the two years Teeter was the superintendent.

superintendent of the district. The community was a divided one, however, and even from the outset politics and gender clashed like oil and water.

This article tells the story of the two-year tenure of Dr. Joan Teeter, Superintendent of Bradford Public Schools.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study arose out of my earlier work on women aspiring to the superintendency (Grogan 1996). Having understood the promise of women leaders reaching the highest position in a school district, I wanted to study a woman in office. The purpose of my study was to understand how a woman deals with the superintendency. Following Biklen and Shakeshaft's (1985) call for more scholarship that seeks to understand women's lived experience, I chose an accomplished woman superintendent who was about to enter her second superintendency after a successful tenure of several years in her first.

I was with Dr. Teeter on thirty different occasions during the twenty-four months of the study. With her permission, I began to shadow her in November of Year 1, and continued to shadow her until March of Year 2. I also met with her for a series of interviews and debriefing sessions from November of Year 1 through May of Year 2. A final interview was conducted in the November following her resignation.

During the study I spent six full days and eleven half days observing Superintendent Teeter in and out of her office. I watched her deal with correspondence, make and return telephone calls, and meet with members of her executive staff, principals, teachers, parents and community members. I also accompanied her to Superintendents' Regional Study Group Sessions, Advisory Group Meetings, Public Forums, Strategic Planning Meetings and visits to schools. I observed her in Board Meetings and City Council Meetings. In addition, I conducted four 60–90 minute interviews to debrief events that occurred during the course of the study, and she and I held many conversations in her car while traveling to and from various sites. The interviews were taped and transcribed and copious notes were taken on every occasion. She also met twice with me in my office to debrief.

The formal interviews were unstructured. They provided me with context and information. Although I used two or three general questions to start each interview and to focus the discussion, I relied on the participant's sense of what she would like to talk about (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Merton and Kendall 1946 in Bogdan and Biklen 1992). I probed salient points for details that would clarify my own impressions of what was occurring and encouraged Dr. Teeter to use the interviews as opportunities for reflection.

According to established methods of qualitative research (Bogdan and Biklen 1992, Glaser and Strauss 1967, Lincoln and Guba 1985, Miles and Huberman 1984, Strauss 1987), I also kept extensive field notes and a methodological log of ideas that informed my understanding of the situation. I reflected constantly on the connections I was making and recorded my insights. I often discussed my impressions with Dr. Teeter and reflected on her feedback. She also read and commented on a draft of this article.

To triangulate the data, I clipped and kept articles from the local press that mentioned Dr. Teeter and the school system from November of Year 1 through the September following her resignation. There are a total of 90 articles from three newspapers: one daily, *The Bradford Chronicle*, and two weeklies, *Bradford About Town* and *The Star*.

I approached the inquiry from a feminist poststructuralist perspective that acknowledges the importance of gender, race, sexuality and class in any analysis of events. It is a postpositivist approach that attempts to deconstruct underlying assumptions (Capper 1998, Lather 1991, Weedon 1997). The goal of deconstruction is "to keep things in process, to disrupt, to keep the system in play, to set up procedures that continuously demystify the realities we create, to fight the tendency for our categories to congeal" (Caputo 1987, in Lather 1991, p. 13). What this means for this study is that I have analyzed the data, allowed categories to emerge, but have not been satisfied with the "knowledge" that these categories suggest. Thus, in addition to identifying certain conditions that appear to have contributed to the short tenure of the superintendent, I have looked critically at these conditions through a feminist poststructuralist lens. In identifying these conditions, I am informed by a growing body of literature on the superintendency in general and on women in the superintendency.

THE NARRATIVE

Joan Teeter was an outsider to the people of Bradford City, but a native of the southern state in which it is located and very familiar with state politics. An active member of the state superintendents' organization, she was no naïve newcomer to community politics. Having served in similar districts throughout her career, she chose carefully when applying for this position. The challenges of demographic change and increased minority presence in the local schools were ones she had met before. When Bradford hired her, the city had been losing students to the two or three surrounding counties for a number of years. Originally a railroad town, with the phasing out of intrastate and interstate train connections, the city faced white flight and a general deterioration of facilities. Some community

members advocated the hiring of an African American superintendent who would be "a strict disciplinarian . . . (and) a positive role model for black students" (*The Bradford Chronicle*, 8/17, Year 1, A7). Nonetheless, Teeter, who is white, was hired by the board with a 5-1 vote.

The board, comprised of two black women, one black man, two white women and two white men, had high confidence in Teeter when she was hired. Although the city itself was largely white, the school district was close to 50 percent African American. The number of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch had increased over the years until approximately 48% of the 4,500 students qualified (Interview #2, 10/23, Year 2).

In the following sections, I describe the two years of Teeter's tenure. The first year can be characterized by the superintendent's emphasis on *forming relationships* and on her *instructional leadership*. Year 2 is divided into two phases: *strained relationships* and the *collision of external and internal forces*.

FORMING RELATIONSHIPS

As her tenure began, Teeter was encouraged to downsize the district administration, prepare a comprehensive plan for renovation of the schools, stabilize a fledgling Alternative Program, and develop a five-year strategic plan (Observation 12/1, Year 1). An executive session with the board in late November that year generated interest from the press. "People are nervous about my intention to downsize," Teeter noted (Observation 12/1, Year 1). A member of the local news media telephoned the superintendent asking why the executive session had been called. "Was it a major incident?" she asked. When Teeter responded that "no action was taken in public session" and that "it was just a personnel matter," the reporter became more insistent (Observation 12/1, Year 1). Teeter did not want to jeopardize her relationship with the press, but came away feeling that "Patricia [the media person] was prickly with me" (Observation 12/1, Year 1). The superintendent also decided to slow down the process of downsizing.

Teeter worked with the Director of Budget and Finance (Mr. B), to hear the needs of each school and to identify areas where personnel might be cut. She formed a close, trusting relationship with him, grateful for his sharing the knowledge he had acquired during his lengthy tenure with the system. For instance, Mr. B fielded all questions at an early board meeting (12/1, Year 1). Fortunately, a new retirement package encouraged one of the executive staff (Mr. M) to announce his plans for leaving before the end of Year 1. Teeter was able to avoid replacing him by apportioning his duties among the rest of the central office staff.

Although Teeter formed early positive connections with two of her executive staff, Mr. B and Mr. P, she was unable to gain the trust of Mrs. C. Unlike other members of the staff, Mrs. C rarely came to Teeter's office unbidden. This formal relationship was maintained throughout Year 1. As a researcher, I had been welcomed by all the executive staff, all the principals and every parent and teacher whom I met in the course of the study. Only Mrs. C requested my absence when, on a couple of occasions while I was shadowing the superintendent, she needed to meet with her. Later, Teeter commented that she could not find a reason for Mrs. C's refusal to allow an observer into these meetings (Observation 1/25, Year 1).

In those first few months, it became clear that Joan Teeter's strength was in reaching out to the public. She often participated in radio talk shows, and made herself available to talk with everyone. She maintained an open-door policy and even allowed unscheduled visits from individuals, provided she had time. Her meetings with representatives from the League of Women Voters, for instance, or with consultants offering workshops for the teachers, gave her an opportunity to relax and connect with the individuals on a personal level. We visited an elementary school to view a promotional telecast one afternoon in December, Year 1. Teeter glanced into many classrooms where she was greeted warmly by teachers and instructional staff who knew her by name (Observation 12/13, Year 1). Always dressed impeccably, the superintendent often wore intriguing accessories such as a seasonal brooch or an education-related pin. These prompted comment and allowed Teeter to respond with humor and personal stories (Observation 12/15, Year 1).

At one meeting with a teacher in the district who had received a grant, the superintendent made a great effort to get to know the person and to form a relationship with her. To facilitate her efforts in the district, the teacher made it clear to the superintendent that she needed extra funds. From my notes:

TE³ sits in close proximity to visitor. Gives her lots of attention. Her body language says "you are important." TE lets her talk and then asks informed questions. The teacher is relaxed, leans back—doesn't appear to be intimidated. TE asks for background information "Now help me out with my newness." TE is looking for business partnerships. "What we need is one businessman that's going to get behind me and help me get to these folks." TE uses humor, lets teacher see the person behind the job. Offers to visit teacher on site and closes with promise to ask city officials for help. (Observation 12/13, Year 1)

Her personal style was best suited to these encounters. She was open, curious and nonthreatening. She tried to let others see her as a resource for

³The abbreviation for Teeter used while notetaking.

their own endeavors. In this way, she quickly gained the confidence of many teachers and community members. She did not win over everyone. Her detractors, often those whose work came under close scrutiny for deficiencies, saw her as cold. On the whole, though, the superintendent was generally successful reaching parents, teachers, and the public during the first few months.

Perhaps her most notable challenge was the board chair. Initially they had a cordial and relaxed relationship. Many times during my observations, the chair, Mrs. W, would be on the telephone or in the building. Teeter always responded to her questions politely and promised to get back to her "after the meeting" (Observation 12/15, Year 1). At times, Mrs. W would visit Central Office but not only to see the superintendent. "We've already talked today" (Observation 1/25, Year 1). Gradually, Teeter began to feel hounded by the chair's calls and offers of advice. During a debriefing session with me in February of Year 1, she admitted feeling frustrated with Mrs. W's many requests. Describing it as a power struggle, the superintendent complained of the micro-managing tactics of the board chair. "She wants more information and more often" (Observation 2/14, Year 1). Yet, since Mrs. W only had one year left on the board, Teeter felt she could persevere. However, the situation worsened toward the end of the spring. Teeter recalled,

She gave me the impression that I needed to call everybody, every day. And I finally confronted her and I said, "You got to decide, you know. Is this all I'm here for?" Then when I had my evaluation, I told all of them, I said, "Something has got to change folks," and from my evaluation, I found out that basically it was only the one person (Mrs. W). . . . Then I had some heart to heart with some of the other members of the board, and I was advised to just leave it, to just leave it. (Interview #3, 12/2, Year 2)

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Joan Teeter described herself as having a strong instructional background. She had early experiences as a teacher, principal and assistant superintendent for instruction. She also had a Master's Degree in reading (Interview #1, 8/9, Year 2). Therefore, working on the strategic plan to raise the achievement level of the students in the district was an area of strength for her. Upon entry into the district and with board encouragement, the superintendent conducted some research and came up with a proposal for more school site accountability that she wanted included in the strategic plan. She introduced the idea at a principals meeting (Observation 12/13, Year 1). From my notes:

TE brings up the scheme she has been working on for accountability—an increase in student achievement at each of the buildings. She's done a lot of reading on this, yet she's nervous about presenting it—playing with rubber bands as she talks. The principals listen silently; some take notes. She talks

about the research and then asks for comments. Plan basically is to offer a monetary reward for sites that improve their own test scores over time. First offer of support comes from staff member Mr. B who makes a speech about channeling money into schools. Mr. N, elementary school principal, not enthusiastic—has philosophical objection to rewarding schools with money. A couple of other principals respond more positively. TE promises to get more information to everyone—she doesn't ask around the table to get each principal's response. (Observation 12/13, Year 1)

Teeter had not made a particularly concerted effort to get support for her idea. Nevertheless, despite the lukewarm reception described above, the superintendent pursued the idea, arranging for a group of volunteer principals to accompany her and Mrs. C to visit a school district in a neighboring state that had successfully implemented a similar plan. The trip took place the following March. Accountability was to be a key item in the strategic plan, which was being developed by staff during the spring of Year 1. To access public opinion on priorities for the strategic plan, a random mail survey was sent to 400 parents and to 200 staff, business people, community leaders and the community at-large. Simultaneously, a steering committee was formed to process the results. The press gave these strategies good coverage.

The new (strategic plan) is targeted for school board review by June 1 of this year. The plans provide written guidelines about what should be accomplished over five year's time and who is to be held accountable for each objective. . . . Questions ask respondents to give the city schools an overall letter grade A through F and to grade 19 performance areas. . . . There are also places to list the school district's two most important strengths and two most important problems. (*Bradford About Town*, 2/23–3/1, Year 1)

Aside from her focus on student achievement, Joan Teeter also demonstrated her concern and interest in instructional issues by promoting a policy to improve attendance at the middle schools and by working to ensure that full-time instructional coordinators were attentive to instruction, rather than management, in their capacity as pseudo-assistant principals (Observation 2/6, Year 1). Since the board had also stressed the need for downsizing, the instructional coordinators did not respond particularly well to her initiative, fearing that their positions might be made half-time. This issue also contributed to the tension between the superintendent and Mrs. C, who supervised the instructional coordinators and was their ally. Curriculum and instruction was Mrs. C's turf. Similar to Mr. B, Mrs. C was a long term, high level administrator who had a significant support group.

Undeterred, Superintendent Teeter put most of her energy into instructional matters during the first year. She described it as "hands-on

instructional leadership." Her purpose was to build a support base and she believed that getting out into the schools and meeting with teachers was the best way to do this (Observation 2/14, Year 1). Teeter introduced the practice of observing principals as they observed teachers and provided evaluative feedback. I shadowed her on two of these occasions (2/6, Year 1, 5/17, Year 1.). She made sure that principals gained the permission of the teachers to do this. Principals arranged for her to see them observe only experienced teachers who were doing well. Teeter used these occasions to point out opportunities for instructional feedback that the principals missed in the post-observation meetings. For example, after the teacher left one of the meetings, the superintendent asked the principal "What was the critical element in her lesson? . . . Did you get her to the point of understanding that? How would you approach this differently next time?" (Observation 5/17, Year 1). Teeter pointed out some reading strategies that the teacher could have used and mentioned that she would like to come back to the school to talk to teachers about specific techniques.

It was hard to interpret the principals' responses to these sessions. In my presence, they appeared comfortable with her comments and seemed to appreciate her input. It is conceivable, however, that the principals simply indulged the superintendent and did not make any significant changes in their post-observation methods. Many of the principals appeared unwilling to embrace serious instructional reform.

At about the same time in the late spring, the superintendent received some negative press from an unfortunate incident that occurred after she and a parent participated in a radio talk show. One of the photographers for the weekly paper, *The Star*, captured a tense moment between the two as they left the radio station. The focus of the talk show had been the Bradford Schools' response to the recent release of state test scores. The parent charged the school district with "spinning" information. The superintendent acknowledged the district's weaknesses but also emphasized gains that were made. The photo caption "Let's emphasize the positive" was to haunt Teeter for the rest of her tenure (*The Star*, 5/2-5/8, Year 1, front page). It is ironic that Teeter alone was associated with putting a positive spin on the results because in the same article, the school board chair, Mrs. W, is quoted as saying,

Of course we're going to emphasize the positive. . . . We acknowledge and will discuss the negative, and we would be happy to work on the negative—in fact we are doing exactly that. . . . But I see nothing peculiar with our releasing a press release that emphasizes positive gains. . . . My feeling is that any time a school district releases information, they certainly try to put the most positive spin on it they can. (*The Star*, 5/2-5/8, Year 1, p. 9)

YEAR 1 IN REVIEW

By the end of the first year of her tenure, Superintendent Teeter had established herself as an educator highly committed to the success of the students in the Bradford Public Schools. Her emphasis on strong interpersonal relationships and her instructional leadership skills gained more supporters than detractors. Most important was the approval she received from the board, at least in public. Other topics that highlighted the first year included budget issues, partnerships with other districts, and personnel issues. She successfully passed her first budget managing to find money to raise salaries. A newspaper article about the board meeting at which the budget was approved, stated:

School Board member [Mr. T.] praised Superintendent Joan Teeter for the preparation of the budget. He said she made tough decisions to find extra money to provide for an average raise of five percent for the school system's 232 teachers as well as for nonclassified personnel. (*The Bradford Chronicle*, 2/17, Year 1, B1)

Teeter also built positive relationships with surrounding school districts. With the board's blessing she broached topics such as sharing services, coordinating staff development, collaborating on adult education, combining summer school activities and joint purchasing practices (*Bradford About Town*, 6/22-6/28, Year 1, p. 12). As one board member explained, "One of the reasons that Dr. Teeter was attractive as a superintendent candidate was she was able to foster cooperation between . . . systems" (*The Bradford Chronicle*, 9/10, Year 2, A10).

Another area in which Teeter had received support and encouragement from the board was in personnel matters. During the year there were several discipline cases and some resignations that Teeter had encouraged. One incident with a classified employee caused her some anguish.

Recently I was asked to fire a person and I refused after investigating the person's work history and the circumstances surrounding the situation; however I did put the person on leave without pay for a period of time. . . . I have quizzed myself . . . more than once, on whether I made the right decision by putting the person on leave. . . . I was trying to reach a compromise with the supervisor who requested his dismissal. . . . It was a difficult situation. I made my decision, [the supervisor] appealed my decision. I brought the parties in to try to compromise. . . . During the course of this meeting I actually reduced the penalty because he had been put on probation as well as receiving a number of days without pay . . . four days later the employee appealed the decision to the school board. The board supported my decision. . . . I was very pleased that the board supported my decision. (Interview #2, 10/23, Year 2)

Perhaps the most troubling personnel issue of the year, however, was the unanticipated retirement of the Assistant Superintendent, Mr. B, who provided a great deal of knowledge and support to Teeter. During the course of the spring semester, some irregularities in the area of budget and finance were brought to her attention.

He had done some things that were very wrong in terms of overpayment . . . the misuse of equipment, things happened to employees under his control . . . And I couldn't tolerate that so he is no longer with us. (Interview #2, 10/23, Year 2)

Later she was able to acknowledge how much he had meant to her.

I felt that I could really trust (Mr. B). When I really needed somebody to talk to about a problem, I felt that I could go to him and I did. I don't think he really gave me bad advice. (Interview #3, 12/2, Year 2)

There was one other unsettling personnel change for Joan Teeter at the end of that first year. Her secretary, Mrs. K., retired. Even though Mrs. K. had announced this early in Teeter's administration, the superintendent knew how hard she would be to replace. "She knows everyone in this town" (Observation 2/14, Year 1). From my notes:

Mrs. K acts as an extra eye for TE. Goes through her mail, sorts out what she should pay attention to, screens her calls, makes local connections for her. (Observation 2/14, Year 1)

However, Teeter framed both of these retirements as an opportunity. She would be able to hire two individuals whose primary loyalty would be to her. She looked forward to being able to trust these individuals and to establishing solid working relationships with them. With the appointment of Mrs. S, as her new secretary, she gained a trusted employee and, generally speaking, suffered no significant loss. Unfortunately, she was not as well served by the appointment of Mr. H. who replaced Mr. B a few months into Year 2.

STRAINED RELATIONSHIPS

In October of Year 2, *The Bradford Chronicle* introduced a positive article reviewing Superintendent Teeter's first year with the headline, "City school chief seeks to build on generally favorable reviews" (10/16, Year 2, A1). School board members and other prominent community members are quoted praising Teeter's first year. "[T]he only school board member to vote against Teeter . . . gave her 'very high marks' for getting out of the central office and meeting with parents and others in the community" (A1). The new school board chair, Mr. F, is quoted as saying "Teeter's first year in office was a year I'm perfectly happy with. It all comes down to student achievement and how

you improve that" (A8). The copresident of one school's PTO said, "We're pleased about her accessibility . . . she's definitely listening. . . . It's good that she's taking time to know community organizations and how they work" (A8). Teeter herself is quoted as saying, she was "very pleased with the accomplishments of the first year" (A8). She received specific approbation. "This was the best year ever for hiring black teachers to fill openings in the Bradford schools" (A8). Finally, the president of the Bradford Teachers Association had this to say: "She's been supportive of a lot of things we've asked for. . . . Overall, we're happy with her" (A8).

Embedded in the favorable review, however, were signs of growing concern. The same parent who had clashed previously with Teeter over the reporting of test scores was quoted questioning "how much Teeter listens to parents" (A8). The area president of the National Education Association commented that the superintendent's "style seems to be very different than the ones we've been used to in the past. . . . It's a very top-down style" (A8). Moreover, there were veiled references to Teeter's plan to raise student achievement. "Using test scores as an isolated indicator can be dangerous" (A8). Nevertheless, the reporter who wrote the article closed on a note of optimism. "Teeter's only regret? 'I'd like to have had more time to be all the places I'd like to be'. . . . Fortunately, she has three more years for that" (A8). Indeed, the belief that Teeter was in for the long haul summed up community sentiment that fall.

The entire school district was consumed in the early part of Year 2 with developing the strategic plan. First drafts of the document were written based on the survey and staff and teacher input. Several public forums were held for refining the document before submission to the board for final approval. Parts of the strategic plan had been very close to Teeter's heart, especially the emphasis on accountability that she promoted during Year 1. Unfortunately, that strand gained little support and was removed from the final plan. She reflected upon events leading up to that decision.

There was such a hue and cry raised about accountability and the way it was written, I fell back and said, "OK how would you write it? What do you want?" And I gave in to the community . . . they weren't ready for the level of accountability that I thought they should have. . . . It wasn't going to make the school system any stronger if I got tied up in a battle, so I just dropped back. . . . Most of the administrators were in favor of this . . . it would have affected the elementary schools the most . . . and I had half who were gung ho and half who were not . . . but parents and some of the other community folk, a board member . . . got very caught up in the assessment process. They felt it was too much testing, so to speak, that took away instructional time. (Interview #2, 10/23, Year 2)

Based on my observations at executive staff meetings and principal meetings, Teeter had not done enough early groundwork to assure that her ideas about student achievement would be accepted. She reflected that it was only at a late summer retreat with her central office leadership team and building administrators that she "had time to hear them and put that into perspective with what (she) was doing" (Interview #3, 12/2, Year 2). She did build the necessary support for the rest of the strategic plan. During the public forums, staff were positive with the community, encouraging of the objectives, and attentive to the community's questions and concerns (Observation 10/2, 10/3, Year 2). Teeter modeled this approach while working with the steering committee charged with editing and rewriting the early drafts. From my notes:

TE opens meeting, thanks those who edited it, but mentions no names (heard at a staff meeting that they do not want to be associated with the document publicly!) TE takes Mrs. C's advice and gives the group some background on why the district is creating this plan—a continuous one. Mrs. C takes the group through the document pointing out changes—accountability has gone. TE is in listening mode, responds well to issues and concerns from floor. (Observation 9/26, Year 2)

By the beginning of the second year there was some evidence of improved relationships with staff and principals. Group meetings were more relaxed, and there was more humor from Teeter and the administrators. The superintendent realized that one of her biggest challenges was "to build a working relationship with staff" (Interview #3, 12/2, Year 2). Looking back over the first year, she acknowledged that she "gave a tremendous amount of attention to the community . . . I don't think I gave enough attention to the staff. . . . I think they were afraid of me because they didn't know me" (Interview #3, 12/2, Year 2). Still, while she was able to repair relations with her leadership team, the earlier lack of communication damaged her relationship with some individual board members.

I have personally taken a lot of hits on (the strategic plan), taken them from staff and I have also taken them from the school board. Had I paid more attention to the staff than what I did, I would not have had the problems with the school board because my staff would have been saying "This is right for us, this is what we've worked on together and this is what we should do." . . . The school board was divided on the plan . . . four were supportive . . . three were not. Well, the three who were not talked a lot to staff because I did not have the support of the staff. (Interview #3, 12/2, Year 2)

THE COLLISION OF EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL FORCES

Soon after *The Bradford Chronicle* (10/16) article appeared, several incidents occurred that cast Teeter in an unfavorable light in the press. *Brad-*

ford About Town criticized her indirectly for not providing information on pupil-teacher ratios (10/26–11/1, p. 10), and for mishandling the public information of an injury (11/16–11/22, p. 10). Both papers ran a story about the School Board's displeasure with Teeter for sending the district technology plan to the State Department of Education without their formal approval. The language used was the strongest to date.

Bradford School Board members doled out a light wrist-slap to Superintendent Joan Teeter . . . demanding to vote on a technology plan that has already been shipped to state officials . . . The result of a somewhat heated discussion was to change language in the strategic plan. (*The Bradford Chronicle*, 11/3, B1)

The *Bradford About Town* headline read: "Chilly technology chat for Teeter and the Board" (11/9–11/15, p. 10). It was clear in both articles that some of the board members felt the slight more than others.

Increasingly evident to the public was a situation that Teeter had been dealing with for some time—a split board that was having difficulty working together. The strained relationship with the former chair had grown to include several other board members. Together the group operated as a faction opposed to other board members. Teeter looked at the situation in retrospect:

I realized within the first year that I had gone into a situation where the board was divided. It was divided before I was ever there. And in some cases, it was bitterly divided. I think, in my first year, after having witnessed the board members and their interaction publicly and in board meetings, and what things they would say to each other on the point of being disrespectful publicly . . . it gave me a clue that it wasn't a situation that I wanted to be in. . . . And so the board was dysfunctional and of course, I think any superintendent's job is to work with them and try to assist them being on the board. But I think, perhaps, the tactics that I used didn't work and probably served to divide the board more. (Interview #4, 11/6, Year 2)

In hindsight, Teeter realized that her efforts to mold a unified board were unsuccessful. She had counted on her instructional emphasis to unite them. It became clear at the end of the first year that the factions were beyond her control. In response, she held board retreats and brought in a consultant, but soon her own decisions undermined the confidence of some of her most avid supporters.

Somewhat like adding fuel to a fire, Superintendent Teeter had hired a young man, Mr. H, to replace Mr. B, the former Director of Budget and Finance. Mr. H did not have the board's confidence, even though they had formally approved his hiring. Mr. H had the responsibility of developing a budget, a process that kicked into full swing about a month after he joined the staff. My observations at a staff meeting revealed that not only did his general inexperience count against him, but that his noned-

educational background exacerbated the situation (Observation 11/17, Year 2). He demonstrated that he was firmly in Teeter's camp however by helping her develop a revised format "the board had long been pressing for" (Observation 2/6, Year 2). Unfortunately, the presentation of the budget in February of that year did not go smoothly. When Superintendent Teeter unveiled the new format at the board meeting, she was severely criticized.

Superintendent Joan Teeter has presented her proposed budget . . . in a new format that she believes will make it easier to read and more understandable to the public. But critics attacked many of the changes at the meeting of the Bradford School Board on Thursday night, saying they obscured more than they clarified. (*The Bradford Chronicle*, 2/2 Year 2, B1)

It took several months to clear up questions and concerns created by the presentation of the proposed budget. Despite sincere and speedy efforts on the part of Teeter, Mr. H, and the rest of the Central Office staff, doubt lingered. There was fear that the school district was not providing full information to the public. A city council member observed during a discussion about the alternative program director's salary, "I guess what bothers me here is that there is shifting of dollars. . . . Where else has this occurred?" (*The Bradford Chronicle*, 3/7, B2)

At the time, Joan Teeter was dealing with a totally unexpected crisis in her private life. She and her husband, Eric, were having marital difficulties (Observation 2/21, Year 2). For professional reasons, he had not accompanied her to Bradford, and they had been commuting weekends and holidays. Initially, although it was not an ideal situation for either of them, they were comfortable with the arrangement despite the fact that Teeter saw her husband only two or three days a week at best. By the winter of Year 2, the traveling between houses and the pressure of the troubled superintendency took its toll. She believes that the personal turmoil rendered her less capable of dealing with the political conflicts.

In reflecting back on what happened to me in the last six months, I was so caught up in my personal life, that I didn't think what happened to me was going to happen to me. . . . [It] really took me by surprise, that suddenly my personal life, I believe, began to impact on my professional life. When I look at the difficulties with . . . the school board, I didn't want to fight it. . . . I felt at that point I needed to drop back and do whatever I needed to do to bring my life back together, because it was more important for me to maintain my married life, than to have a job. (Interview #4, 11/6, Year 2)

Confidence in Teeter's superintendency deteriorated quickly. From December of Year 2, Teeter was unsure of her future in Bradford. Her per-

sonal trials consumed much of her energy although she remained publicly enthusiastic about the district's reform efforts. She saw evidence that many of her instructional approaches were being implemented in the schools. Teachers and principals whom she had won over were working hard to raise reading levels and test scores.

In April, the press once again focused on the school district's interpretation of the state report of student progress. In a provocative headline, "Tracking the truth of the [report]. How 'encouraging' are the latest performance results of the Bradford City Schools?" one of the papers kept the earlier controversy alive (*Bradford About Town*, 4/11-4/17, p. 8). Teeter and the board tried to give as accurate a picture of student achievement as possible. Nevertheless, a lasting impression was formed by what the public saw as Teeter's overly optimistic attitude. Teeter summarized the results by saying, "A long-term look at the performance of Bradford's students is encouraging. This is reflected by the improved standardized test scores over time . . . encouraging because . . . students who stay with us . . . are seeing some good results" (p. 9).

When Teeter resigned in June, several newspaper accounts mentioned her positive attitude as a failing.

Teeter has been criticized by education advocates for glossing over problems in her presentations to the school board and the public—including her reports on test scores in the city schools and the budget—and for having a constantly positive approach that leads people to question her credibility. (*The Bradford Chronicle*, 6/21, A1)

Teeter's resignation surprised everyone. There was no public outcry for her removal. There was no public statement by the board. There was still momentum in the buildings for her reform efforts. Only those closest to her knew that she had been considering her options for some time. It was an abrupt ending to a twenty-month tenure that seemed stable during the first twelve months.

DISCUSSION

I studied Joan Teeter with the intent of gaining insight into the dynamics of the superintendency in a city school system. After analyzing the data it became clear that Superintendent Teeter faced a number of difficulties, some of her own making, and some over which she had little control. There were four problems that plagued her superintendency: (1) lack of staff support, (2) dealing with a dysfunctional board, (3) hiring a new assistant superintendent, and (4) the emphasis on accountability.

LACK OF STAFF SUPPORT

In retrospect, Superintendent Teeter realized that not forming a better relationship with her staff during the first year was a serious oversight. However, at the time she was too busy establishing relationships with the public to pay attention to staff relationships. This prevented her from gaining the staff support she needed to introduce her accountability plans. For instance, instead of establishing trust with Mrs. C, Teeter's instructional expertise and her gender threatened the assistant superintendent. They clashed on many issues. Mrs. C's longevity in the school district, served as an advantage for her. The central office staff viewed curriculum and instruction as Mrs. C's turf. Mrs. C also controlled the extent to which Teeter received vital background knowledge and information. Had Teeter's ally, Mr. B, remained in place, he might have been able to mediate the situation somewhat. Mrs. C had survived several superintendents, all of whom let her head curricular efforts. Few male superintendents move into a superintendency from a position in curriculum, nor do they spend much time in the classroom (Glass 1992) thus, Teeter's interest and efforts in this area were unanticipated by the staff and threatened Mrs. C.

DEALING WITH A DYSFUNCTIONAL BOARD

Teeter admits that she was not able to work well with the board. Some of this was due to a power struggle with Mrs. W, the board chair during Year 1. They were both high profile, independent women who vied for public support on various educational issues. Mrs. W had the advantage of knowing the community and the staff better than the superintendent did. As board chair Mrs. W had "managed" the former superintendent. Whether he acted upon her advice or not, he accepted it and reported to her frequently. Mrs. W and one or two other board members attempted to encroach on Superintendent Teeter's administrative functions, but she resisted. Such behavior by board members is frequently detrimental to board-superintendent relationships (Beni, Cooper and Muth 1988; Kennedy 1984; Hoyle and Oates 1994; McAdams and Cressman 1997; McCloud and McKenzie 1994; Plucker and Kruger 1987; Wilson 1980) as it was in this case. Race and money issues also contributed to the divisiveness of the board, as did community politics. This latter tension shaped the relationship between the city of Bradford and the surrounding counties, and contributed to the board's inability to function as a whole. Despite arranging for mediation and for board retreats, Teeter could not help the board come together as a unit. In fact, towards the end of Year 2, two male board members resigned prior to the end of their terms, due to the lack of board

cohesiveness. Perhaps no superintendent could have been successful, given the situation.

HIRING A NEW ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT

Another problem that arose for Teeter was hiring Mr. H as Assistant Superintendent for Budget and Finance. Considering how difficult it was for her to gain the confidence of her central office staff, it is understandable that she wanted to select her own person. She hoped that finding someone she could trust would provide her with support in the district. However, in her eagerness to ensure that loyalty, Teeter, once again, neglected to lay the foundation for his acceptance. Although the board acquiesced to her wishes, many of them were not in favor of employing Mr. H. Staff were skeptical of his background and expertise in education. There was no doubt that he knew the area of budget and finance—he simply lacked credibility. Unfortunately, his tenure in Bradford City Schools was doomed from the start. Ironically, it is likely that Teeter's position in the district was adversely affected rather than enhanced by Mr. H's presence.

THE EMPHASIS ON ACCOUNTABILITY

Superintendent Teeter's "hands-on" instructional approach also contributed to her demise. In a district where superintendents had not been known for their instructional proficiency, some of the principals resented Teeter's involvement in matters they saw as their own. Others did not. Some readily embraced her ideas and made changes. She was particularly knowledgeable in reading methods and some teachers and principals learned much from her. In general, however, her questioning the need for full-time curriculum coordinators in the schools and her hopes for more accountability at the individual school sites made her unpopular. While everyone was aware of the need to raise test scores, Teeter's methods were described as "too much, too fast." Had Teeter not followed the board's lead in trying to paint an entirely rosy picture but, instead, emphasized the low scores and the race-related concerns she had about achievement, attendance, and dropout rates, her proposed strategies for raising test scores might later have gained more community acceptance. As it was, she was crucified for "glossing over problems" in public.

SEEKING AN EXPLANATION

I did not imagine this study would be as short-lived as it turned out to be. I anticipated several years in the field and the opportunity to compile rich

data on a variety of different aspects of the superintendency. I imagined myself doing a longitudinal study because of the promise of women in leadership positions that was emerging from the literature. Noddings (1984, 1992) and Gilligan (1993) have written of women's capacities for relationship-building and suggested that women who care about those they lead and who establish good connections with them, are likely to be successful. Wheatley's (1992) theories on relational leaders also supports that premise. During this study, I saw ample evidence that Joan Teeter had the skills to build relationships and that she did, indeed, care about the students and community she was serving.

The literature is also beginning to discuss the importance of instructional expertise for the superintendent (Bjork 1993; Glass 1993a, b, and c; Hord 1993; Murphy and Hallinger 1986; Myers 1992; Paulu 1989). The American Association of School Administrators (1993) standards emphasize the importance of a sound knowledge of curriculum and instructional issues for superintendents. Standards five and six, for example, require superintendents to be fully informed of current research and best practice in those areas (pp. 9–10). Joan Teeter certainly had a strong background in instruction and her knowledge and information was current. So what went wrong? Is it possible that she was ahead of her time with her proposals for more accountability? Perhaps the district was simply not ready for her. To gain further insights, I turn now to feminist inspired literature that offers additional ways to view what Superintendent Teeter experienced.

Until recently, most of the literature on the superintendency has emerged from men's experiences in that position. However, there is a growing body of literature that suggests that women encounter life as a superintendent somewhat differently than men (Alston 1999; Beekley 1999; Blount 1998, 1999; Brunner 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999; Chase 1995; Grogan 1999; Grogan and Henry 1995; Grogan and Smith 1998; Jackson, B. 1996, 1999; Jackson, D. 1999; Kamler and Shakeshaft 1999; Lindle, Miller and Lagana 1992; Maienza, J. 1986; Mendez-Morse 1999; Ortiz 1991, 1999; Ortiz and Ortiz 1993; Pavan 1999; Scherr 1995; Tallerico 1994, 1999; Tallerico and Burstyn 1996; Tallerico, Burstyn and Poole 1993; Wesson and Grady 1994, 1995). For this reason, I believe it is worthwhile to place gender in the foreground and consider Teeter's situation from a feminist perspective.

A Feminist Poststructuralist Account

Feminist poststructuralism (Capper 1998, Davies 1993, Weedon 1997), combines constructs from poststructuralism such as language and dis-

course, subject and subjectivity, power, and common sense, with feminist theory.⁴ The combination is helpful in deconstructing women's experiences in a largely male discourse. This lens permits me to take another look at what happened to Joan Teeter so that we do not simply write off her experience as a "typical" example of a superintendent who was mismatched with the community, or a "clear" case of failed board-superintendent relationships. While both explanations may have some "truth," they fail to capture the complexities of a situation shaped by the gender of the superintendent. Two of the constructs of feminist poststructuralism (Capper 1998, Davies 1993, Weedon 1997) in particular, allow me to probe the data more deeply: the idea of a discourse of the superintendency and the notion of subjectivity.

Foregrounding Teeter's gender allows me to explore her experience from a perspective that gender matters. As Scott (1988) argues, "The term 'gender' is part of the attempt by contemporary feminists to stake claim to a certain definitional ground, to insist on the inadequacy of existing bodies of theory for explaining persistent inequalities between women and men" (p. 41).

With this in mind, three important determinants emerge as we probe the context of Teeter's failure to survive as superintendent of Bradford City.

1. Joan Teeter was the first woman superintendent of the district. As a result, she was compared to predecessors who were men and approached the superintendency from a male perspective.
2. The board chair in Year 1 who remained a member of the board in Year 2, had grown accustomed to working with a male superintendent and had learned how to be chair under the former superintendent.
3. Teeter's husband did not accompany her to Bradford and this was interpreted by some board members as a sign of Teeter's lack of commitment to the community. Not only did Joan personally suffer from her husband's absence, but her superintendency was also placed under suspicion. When male superintendents move into a new position and are not accompanied by their wives, communities tend to place less value on the circumstances. Therefore, Teeter was clearly perceived as a "woman" superintendent, not simply as a superintendent.

These perceptions, grounded in stereotypes, influenced how the community responded to Teeter. Women are expected to be warm and friendly. However, the superintendent was initially described as the "ice queen." Men who do not relate well to others are never described as "ice kings." The image suggested not only coldness but also arrogance. As a result, Teeter had to work

⁴For a fuller discussion of feminist poststructuralism used to analyze women in educational administration see Grogan, 1996, 1999; Capper, 1992, 1998.

twice as hard to overcome the impression of distance. She was aware of this impression and believed that, over time, people would find her to be quite the opposite. The accolades for bridge building that preceded her entry into Bradford reinforced her confidence. Some of Teeter's difficulties then were compounded by how others perceived her gender.

Ultimately, although a male superintendent might have used similar approaches, and had similar difficulties, Joan Teeter was a woman superintendent. She was perceived differently in her role as superintendent than a man would have been. She received higher visibility in the position than a male superintendent would have. None of the male superintendents in the surrounding counties were featured in the newspaper as often as she was. Tallerico, Burstyn and Poole (1993) found this to also be true for other women superintendents.

To acknowledge Teeter's gender as a factor does not mean that a man would have been more successful. There is no way of knowing that. Nor does it mean that all women would have failed. What it does suggest is that Joan Teeter's particular situation was compounded by her gender. Taking a feminist poststructuralist view, it is possible to see how the various subject positions available to women collide with the discourse of the superintendency. Since the superintendency has been defined in male terms, the notion of superintendent is synonymous with male. In many communities, the position is associated with power and prestige. Any woman who becomes a superintendent is immediately rendered "other." What this study suggests is that although the position of superintendent carries with it power and public authority, women superintendents may have to fight harder to enjoy the privileges of the superintendency, both personally and professionally.

On a personal level, when Joan Teeter was trying to save her marriage, no one advised her husband to resign his position and move to Bradford. He was as professionally qualified and capable of finding employment as she was. Instead, it was strongly suggested that Joan should go "home" to be with him. As a superintendent, she earned a good salary yet had the added pressure of demonstrating to some board members that she was committed to the community. Her husband's presence in Bradford might have restored the board's confidence in her—although from a feminist point of view this is perhaps the least desirable way of gaining their approval.

Professionally, the traditional male model of the superintendency encouraged staff and community alike to expect both a similar and a different approach from Joan Teeter. In a sense, she was expected to act the same as her male predecessors but yet to act feminine and "ladylike." By moving too quickly and aggressively, she had in the eyes of the staff, board, and community, violated her femininity. In losing board and staff support, she found it difficult to gain the support of other powerful figures in the

community. Had she been viewed as strong enough to deal with the board chair, had it not been seen as a power struggle [a male prerogative] between two *women*, she might have found allies in the wider community. Moreover, if she had been viewed as the expert educator she was, instead of as a woman, her positive "spin" on the test scores might not have caused her to lose credibility.

Historically, women have not been superintendents often enough or long enough for different forms of subjectivity to emerge in the discourse. As Weedon (1997) explains, "Whereas, in principle, the individual is open to all forms of subjectivity, in reality individual access to subjectivity is governed by historically specific social factors and the forms of power at work in a particular society" (p. 91). This is changing. Women are entering the position in greater numbers and are defining it in new and unique ways. Some women superintendents fit very comfortably into the male defined norms and some do not. Some men are learning from the way women approach the position, offering more options to all.

CONCLUSION

How does this study inform the efforts of women aspiring to the superintendency or women in the superintendency? On the surface, the story is bleak. Given the nature of the superintendency, however, it is not a unique account. Should women be discouraged by Teeter's experiences? I think not and Joan Teeter also shares that perspective. Although she wanted to stay in Bradford and see her reform efforts mature, she realized that it would not happen. All superintendents need to know when to "cut their losses" and move on. The most important thing is that she did not lose confidence in her own abilities. Upon reflection, and from the vantage point of a "new" third superintendency, she understands the influence of her personal life on her professional one and sees more clearly the pitfalls she was unable to avoid being a woman superintendent in that community. She is now more cognizant of the mysterious ways in which gender complicates the superintendency.

There are many good reasons for men and women to exit the superintendency altogether. Beekley (1999), Tallerico (1994), and Tallerico, Burstyn and Poole (1993) cite situations similar to the one in which Joan Teeter found herself. Teeter did accept an administrative position at a lower level for awhile. But she knew that giving up the superintendency would reinforce the stereotypical responses that had constrained her. For any hope of a different set of responses emerging, it is imperative that we, as women, use whatever means are at our disposal to resist the patterns

that have been established for us. Women need to define the superintendency by their own terms. They must not be cowed by the types of difficulties Joan Teeter faced, or by other gender-related difficulties. Understanding what can happen in situations like those described in this study gives women the power to do things differently. The worth of studies such as this one lies

not in the recounting of great deeds performed by women but (in) the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies. (Scott 1988, p. 27)

With this approach begins the rewriting or reinventing of women in the superintendency.

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