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Susan Miller Dorsey (1857-1946):  
Trailblazer for Women School Superintendents

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### Abstract

Though women are increasingly breaking the glass ceiling into the position of school superintendent, the profession continues to be predominately occupied by men. More historical biographs of successful female superintendents may encourage women to pursue the role. To that end, this study examined the impact of a progressive-era trailblazer for women in educational leadership, Susan Miller Dorsey, superintendent of Los Angeles City Schools from 1920 to 1929. Two critical questions were addressed: What factors influenced Dorsey? Can her experiences in administration reveal any critical influences for present-day female teachers who pursue administrative positions?

*Keywords:* history of education, school administration, progressive education, superintendency

Susan Miller Dorsey (1857-1946):

### Trailblazer for Women School Superintendents

Susan Miller Dorsey (1857-1946) practiced her craft from 1890 until her death in 1946. If historians such as David Brinkley (2010) are correct in their timeline assessment, this distinctive American era in which Dorsey practiced was at the height of the progressive era—a Golden Age for women and education. This paper focuses on the history of the role of women in education and provides a biography of Susan Miller Dorsey relevant to her accomplishments and struggles as superintendent of the Los Angeles City School District.

Resolute, fair minded, and concerned about education are attributes that could fairly be attributed to Dorsey. Though history has left her obscured and unknown, as is the case with many female historical figures, her successes and accolades deserve recognition. Dorsey triumphed in an era in which men dominated and women were seen and not heard. She encountered obstacles and tragedies in her life, but she succeeded beyond all expectations of women in her historical time period. Susan Miller Dorsey is a historic personage and a testament to female virility, tenacity, and diligence. It is because

of her and her obscurity that this research needs to be exposed in academia. Women leaders need role models and heroes, not just cinematic villainous heroines.

Scant shelf space in libraries has been afforded to successful women. This paper will add a needed historical review of a woman whom others could easily emulate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To be sure, there are notable histories of female figures, but there are few stories of the common everyday heroes who did their job, loved their families, and succeeded without media fanfare. These are the women heroes who need their stories told.

Educational historian Lawrence Cremin (1961) suggested that there has been no concise definition of progressive education, no defined progressive model, and no particular progressive leadership style. Progressivism meant different things to different people at different times. Cremin argued that many educators adopted a more practical curriculum and methodology for teaching and learning but in many cases tweaked the methodology to fit their personal needs and concerns. Because of this human nuance, progressive education took on a specific philosophy mirrored by the region or state enacting it. For instance, Dorsey utilized a personal version of a socially minded curriculum but maintained local control of her vision for the Los Angeles schools, which departed from the practical nationalist approach insisted upon by Dewey adherent Ella Flagg Young in Chicago. Cremin found that diversification and individualism made American education unique and flexible to the needs of the multicultural demographic taking shape in America at the time. The following section is a review of the ambiance of education in America prior to Progressivism.

### **Education Prior to Progressivism**

Thomas Jefferson believed that education of the nation's youth should be under the control of local government, free from religious influences, and available to all citizens (Butts, 1978). In the 1840s, common-school reformers argued that common schooling for all children would result in citizens who could make informed choices that would support the democracy, unite society, and prevent crime and poverty. Free public education at the K-6 level was available for all children by the end of the 19th century. Massachusetts implemented the first compulsory school attendance laws in 1852. By 1918, all states had laws requiring children to attend through the sixth grade (Butts, 1978).

Before progressivism, education was characterized by a classical platonic philosophy. Knowledge, disseminated with a passive, rote methodology discouraged active student participation. However well-intended, educational practices, as the nation matured, became an anachronistic system. The prevailing system was not responsive to the largest number of potential consumers of education, America's poor and immigrant children. The needs of children in general were not addressed, regardless of socioeconomic status (Cubberly, 1908; Key, 1908). Ellwood P. Cubberley and Elaine Key found that learning was mostly rote memorization and teacher centered, which lacked the ability to inspire children. Key further reminded readers that children, girls and boys alike, were treated as little adults. Key asserted that children needed to be the center of the educative or learning process if they were to achieve a sense of worth and gain the most benefit.

Cubberley (1908) agreed that children were not receiving the greatest benefit from education and the prevailing curriculum methodology. Cubberly contended that the

schooling of children, because of a forced curriculum designed by well-intended men who misinterpreted the “social connections [and] social efficiency” (p. 203) of schools and their new role in society, lagged behind the modern expectations and needs of an industrial society. Cubberley sought to revise the educative process to reflect a democratic education fit to the intellectual needs and expectations of the students. To accomplish this task, Cubberley insisted that it should begin with teachers. The new educator was to “embrace knowledge of democracy’s needs and problems” (p. 206).

Cubberley (1908) blamed the educational malaise in America on the superfluity of women teachers. Ironically, when advocating a conditional democracy, Cubberley accused females of being uninterested in learning the needs of a democracy. Cubberley contended women too often studied for examinations for qualification rather than to encourage or inspire intellectual inquiry, and they resorted to the anachronistic models of a rote methodology. Women were too sheltered from the realities of the world and therefore failed to grasp the real need for democratic study and practical solutions to a changing world. Susan E. Chase (1995) suggested this cultural perception of frailty juxtaposed alongside assumed gender inequality evolved into institutional obstacles concerning female educational leadership and has persisted into the twentieth century.

Cubberley (1908) inferred that, as soon as practicable, education should eliminate the examination process and instill a more rigorous method of qualification for new teachers. It might reasonably be assumed that Cubberley desired women out of the educative process. In spite of Cubberley’s apparent misogynistic attitude toward female teachers, many progressive reformers agreed such a methodology would be a travesty of social justice and would retard American culture. Female reformers ignored Cubberley

and continued to agitate for reform (Giele, 1995). Regardless of Cubberley's pronouncements, females were well entrenched in the educative process and the social reform movements. Women, no longer dilettantes with political and reform initiatives because of experience they gained in the temperance and suffrage movements, took on a larger role concerning education and social reform.

Women were at the forefront of many progressive initiatives such as social welfare reform, child labor laws, suffrage, and most importantly education. The collective power of activist women reached its height during this era of social and gender consciousness. Giele (1995) in *Two Paths to Women's Equality* described progressive women as "solid middleclass who voted republican ... and the heroines were the new college educated women" ( p. 146). Giele intimated that women established a political and social voice, believing themselves equal to men. The traditional male reaction was to ignore or relegate women to the domestic sphere, claiming that in everything but politics, business, and school leadership roles, the majority of women were to retain domestic roles. The women-driven quasi-liberation movement opened doors previously barred to women. Male academic administrators closely mirrored the gender politics of society, as it was the rare occasion when women were exalted to administrative positions. Giele reported some notable exceptions, but the conventional wisdom concerning women and administration barred them from such positions. Regardless of obstacles, opportunities in education began to expand to include female administrators entering at the local and state levels.

Still, the Progressive Era was aptly named. By the 1920s, American attitudes began to embrace various reforms. Women not only had the vote but also administered



school facilities, school districts, and served on school boards. The progressives formed an educational association and published in *The Journal of the National Education Association* (1921) that “schools ... [were] ... the vehicle to Americanization” (p. 9). The National Education Association, the professional organization publishing the journal, consisted of progressive educators located in Washington, D.C. They issued a follow-up statement concerning their primary function in American education. They intimated the need of a national organization with authority to ensure a cohesive effort to “elevate the character and advance the interests of . . . [professional educators] . . . and to promote the cause of education in the United States” (NEA Creed, 1921, p. 1). The idea was to have a dedicated and educated citizenry. To do this, it was necessary to have citizens imbued in the principles of American democracy and patriotism. To ensure credibility, reform needed to be extended to all citizens, regardless of gender. Though women, since 1850, had made up the largest share of educators, leadership roles were nominal at best. It seemed they could teach America but not lead America.

It would be, however, in education that many progressives pinned their hopes of culturally and socially transforming America. Conceivably, according to Bury (1913), if the masses were educated in practical vocations, many societal ills could be resolved. Much of societal decadence, in progressive minds, could be associated with unemployment and inability to assimilate wholly into modern American society. Lack of adequate education and job training were deemed culpable.

### **Overview of the Progressive Era**

If we accept Susan Maddox’s (2001) study of progressive educator Margaret Willis and her times, progressivism spanned some 60 years before its demise in the

1950s. During the progressive era, scholarly journals exposed a conscious concern that the United States (U.S.) faced challenges such as massive democratization, immigration fluxes, and technological expansion. U.S. educational leaders had little choice but to rethink educational models (The Century, 1884, 1889, 1890). Dorsey, a rare female administrator, managed an efficient administration of K-12 schools and community colleges in Los Angeles County during one of the largest growing expansions in the county's history. She oversaw a large expansion of building campuses, implemented practical curriculum changes, and fostered vocational training and community colleges at a time during which the Los Angeles County student population rose from just over 40,000 students to over 400,000 students (McGregor, 1949).

Geraldine Joncich Clifford (1987), suggesting that for women to be successful and gain the esteem and confidence to pursue higher administrative educational roles, argued the importance of women role models, mentorship, and the recitation of women's histories. Clifford contended it was time to move from narrow biographs and local case studies to a broad range of studies defining women in the broader context of not only educational history but also U.S. history. Based on Clifford's recommendations, it is the intent of this paper to inspire and encourage more female aspirations for leadership and administrative participation. There are presently few leadership role models for women in education, particularly for high level leadership positions. The lack of exposure to aspiring and maturing young girls to role models has served to limit expectations by omission.

**Susan Miller Dorsey**

Susan Miller Dorsey was born in 1859 in Penn Yan County, New York, in the up-state Finger Lakes resort area. Her father and mother incorporated education prominently in their children's upbringing. Susan was an energetic child, resourceful and detail oriented. She excelled at school, in particular the classical languages, Greek and Latin. Upon turning 16, she applied and entered Vassar College. She received a Bachelor's of Arts in the classics discipline. After working for a short time as a professor of languages at Vassar, she met and married Reverend Patrick Dorsey. They immediately made the transcontinental trip to settle in Los Angeles, California. At an unidentified time within the next nine years, Patrick took the couple's nine-year-old son Paul and deserted Susan in Los Angeles, never to make personal contact again.

Without any prospects, Susan applied to a Los Angeles high school and received a teaching position. Within a few years, she became head of the classics department and held that position until 1913, at which time she accepted a position as assistant superintendent within the Los Angeles County School District (LACSD). Dorsey remained at this post until unanimously appointed by the all-male school board to become the Superintendent of LACSD in 1920. Dorsey reluctantly accepted the duties, but once in office, she immediately began stamping her legacy on the school district.

### **The Dorsey Legacy**

Dorsey, a prominent progressive educator during the 1920s, has been unrecognized by historians for her contributions to education. She was a self-proclaimed conservative republican, believed in a pragmatic philosophy immersed in progressivism (McGregor, 1949). A conservative fundamentalist Christian and skeptical of government regulation, she ironically embraced philosopher John Dewey's pragmatic education

principles and Franklin Bobbitt's progressive and social curriculum models, suggesting that successful curriculum measures must be "social in nature" (McGregor, 1949, p. 82). To Dorsey, academic standards were commendable, but students needed socialization and integration into society.

Dorsey managed her education responsibilities according to the circumstances and needs of her particular environment. This theme dominated Dorsey's superintendence of LACSD. Her worldview matured based upon intrinsic demographics particular to her region of influence, her educational philosophy, and her middle class and religious background. She never compromised on a principle but willingly admitted when wrong and moved forward. She possessed integrity and was known to be extremely ethical in her practices. She led by example, modeling the leadership she expected of others.

She hired her own assistant superintendents. She re-evaluated school administrators and immediately became a strong teacher advocate. Dorsey advocated and secured paid maternity and sick leave for teachers and initiated a plan to secure health and retirement insurance for all teachers in LACSD. She improved the school system with modern available technology. She figured prominently in a relationship with the Los Angeles Police Department to have security available for in-school and after-school events. She pushed through several bond referendums of some \$130 million dollars to build new schools. Dorsey advocated and—with community backing—implemented night schools and vocational schools. She also started community colleges and Sloyd Schools to assist the needs of an expanding economic and multicultural community (McGregor, 1949).

Dorsey, however, could be strict and regimented with her teachers. She re-evaluated many of the teachers and made it mandatory that all teachers in the district achieve teaching certification. None were grandfathered in. Each teacher was allotted a reasonable amount of time to gain certification, or they faced termination. Dorsey believed in quality education and that it could only be accomplished by quality teachers controlling the education process.

Dorsey, though she implemented many benefits for the teachers, refused to allow them to organize, igniting controversy of the right to collectively bargain. Her angst was that unions would undermine the integrity of the educative process. Dorsey refused to allow political corruption to taint education. Yet, she was not averse to using her office to manipulate and influence the political process to secure materials and new initiatives for the school system. She demanded much from her teachers and from herself as well. Integrity and accountability were standards of her administrative philosophy. All were to abide religiously within the established educative parameters: no exceptions.

Similarly, Dorsey would go to great lengths to shield her teachers from the press when confronted with sensitive issues until her office had exhausted a thorough investigation. One such incident arose over the abduction and brutal murder of 12-year-old Marion Parker. Dorsey speculatively would have never allowed the incident to play out as it did. According to her niece Susie Miller, who recounted the incident years later, Dorsey staunchly defended her teacher (McGregor, 1949). In Dorsey's mind, the teacher in question had suffered enough having to live with the unfortunate incident for her remaining days. Constant public condemnation in the media seemed beyond reason.

Dorsey's leadership style was student-centered and humanitarian but always within the framework of established rules and regulations. She exuded enormous business acumen and a firm grasp of management principles. For instance, Dorsey asked the following of any problem put to her: What is it? Why is it? Moreover, what of it? To avoid a waste of time and talents, it was important to scrutinize any issue vigorously before deeming it worthy of action. Dorsey possessed a simple ethic: "Do each day's work each day" (McGregor, 1949, p. 51).

Her thinking is a corollary to modern business gurus James Kouzes and Barry Posner's (2007) admonition to administrators for taking on too much and not focusing on the immediate needs of the organization. Management professor Peter F. Drucker (1967), writing in *Effective Executives*, would agree with Dorsey suggesting one should tend to immediate needs rather than focusing too far in the future. Dorsey understood that effective leaders got things done and achieved doable goals. To get things done, Dorsey managed projects and delegated when convenient, but in all cases, she got things done in a timely efficient manner. Dorsey's story, entwined with education leadership and women's study disciplines, suggest women have, when allowed, participated in education management and achieved remarkable successes.

Dorsey functioned efficiently and proficiently in a male-dominated political environment, succeeding beyond all expectations. She managed controversy and adversaries with equal skill and respect. She refused to engage in petty verbal jousting with adversaries such as muckraker Upton Beall Sinclair. Sinclair took personal issue with Dorsey and her style of education management. Dorsey spoke her piece and communicated frequently and skillfully with the political apparatus and the community to

achieve her initiatives. She left the political bantering to the media, politicians, and muckrakers. Initiatives, however, always focused around student learning and community access to education. Dorsey was politically shrewd, winning her converts and community support for many initiatives despite some controversy. She was confident enough to know what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. She showed great perspicacity with personal and professional issues, knowing when to ask or how to ask but never in a commanding or coercing manner. She possessed the principles of leadership that Peter F. Drucker and other management experts would write about in many books later in the century. Again, if Kouzes and Posner are correct that leadership is based on a challenge or contrary view to the status quo (a vision) and that leaders can be made, it is acceptable to judge Dorsey as a leader. However, Dorsey exemplified certain leadership characteristics that seem to suggest that leadership is more than an aggregate of learned traits and rules intimated by Kouzes and Posner. Dorsey reluctantly accepted the responsibilities of her office, but once there, she arose to the occasion and thrived in her new environment. Dorsey thrived beyond the normative criteria for leadership suggested by Kouzes and Posner. She exhibited a penchant for abstract vision necessary to see LACSD excel above the national norm and to accept innovative direction, building a bridge across the social spectrum of a large diversified city with needs and expectations heretofore unrealized. The leadership experts are correct that there are certain rules and principles that quantify quality leadership, but there is also an inherent perspicacity to know when and how to initiate an action. Leadership is more than criteria. It is relating to people and managing both people and events with discernment. Dorsey was an adept and personable leader who empowered her

subordinates but also commanded respect. Simply put, Dorsey led with unwavering principle.

### **Conclusion**

During the Progressive era, the feminization of education exploded on a grand scale. Women made up the lion's share of teachers; however, in the administrative sector they remained underrepresented, as they continue to be today. During the progressive era, women quickly began filling administrative jobs in education, which prompted Chicago City Schools superintendent Ella Flagg Young to suggest that "women would soon dominate school leadership in the same way they did teaching" (Blount, 1995, p. 9; Brunner, 2007, p. 4). By 1930, women claimed 11% of the overall superintendent positions in America. Unfortunately, Young's bold prediction never came to fruition. Nearly 100 years later, women remain underrepresented at only 18%. Though there is a dearth of extant information, recently there has been a revival of searching as to why this phenomenon persists. The reason most prominently put forth is typically sexist and prejudicial in nature. Because of these barriers, the biggest issue is that presently, women have few role models or experienced mentors, compared to their male peers. This admission is itself a pertinent reason to study Susan Miller Dorsey. Her story needs telling if for no other reason than to help fill a void much needed in American education history.



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