

INTRODUCTION

NEW QUESTIONS ABOUT WOMEN AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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As we begin the twenty-first century, we hear more and more about trends toward globalization and about how our economies are driven by the vagaries of the global market (McQuaig 1998). We live in an era of rapid communication, and increasingly we find that people are reaching across international borders to tackle similar problems. Since the 1900s, in many countries around the globe, teaching has represented one of the largest occupational categories for women.¹ Despite a strong numerical representation in the teaching ranks, however, most often it has been men, not women, who have occupied official leadership roles in schools. The chapters in this book bring together international perspectives on women and school leadership and pose a number of questions designed to spark further inquiry about leadership, gender, and power in current school contexts in a number of countries.

In 1909, Ella Flagg Young, the first female superintendent of Chicago schools, optimistically declared that women were “destined to rule the schools of every city” (Blount 1998, 1). Her prediction was to fall sadly short, not only in America but also in countries such as Canada, Britain, New Zealand, and Australia. A number of important books and articles by several of the authors who have contributed to this volume (Blackmore and Kenway 1993 in Australia; Dunlap and Schmuck 1995 in the United States; Hall 1996 in the United Kingdom; Reynolds and Young 1995 in Canada; and Strachan 1997 in New Zealand) have addressed the issue of women and educational leadership through a feminist lens.

In 1998, I invited ten women from five different countries to participate in a symposium at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research

Association in San Diego, California. We came together to present information about our recent research on women and school leadership and to indicate questions that would enhance and enlarge existing discourse on this important topic. Along with our international audience, we began a debate at that symposium that challenged each of us to consider the differences and similarities in our perspectives and underlying assumptions. This book contains expanded versions of our symposium papers and brings together in one place ideas that, while developed in reference to particular localized settings, have implications for other venues. The collected works cross a number of borders and draw upon a rich interdisciplinary and international literature base.

In the United States, organizational theorists Rosabeth Kanter (1977) and Kathy Ferguson (1984) and historians David Tyack and Elizabeth Hansot (1982), among others, have tried to explain the gendered division of labor in schools. In Canada, these themes have been explored by sociologists such as Dorothy Smith (1987) and by historians such as Alison Prentice (1977), who have pointed out that the development of publicly funded schools was largely accomplished because of a gendered division of labor whereby teaching, particularly of very young children, was viewed as most appropriately done by women (Danylewycz, Light, and Prentice 1987), while management, administration, and official leadership work, such as that done by the school superintendent, was seen as most appropriately “a man’s task” (Abbott 1991). Economist Marilyn Waring (1989) in New Zealand and education critics such as Bob Connell (1987) from Australia, and Madeline Arnot (1986) and Gaby Weiner (1989) from Britain, to name only a few, also have offered important contributions to a vibrant, albeit muted, international discourse about the roles of men and women in elementary and secondary schools and in colleges and universities.

The authors whose work is brought together in this book differ from one another in terms of their backgrounds, perspectives, writing styles, and research approaches. Clearly, despite these differences, they agree with Marcia Linn (1998) that much of the literature on women and educational leadership suggests

an agenda for the future that sustains successful practices, while also broadening partnerships across disciplines, incorporating professional perspectives from other communities, and developing new methodologies for investigation. These perspectives . . . establish equity and diversity as respectable research, policy, and personal pursuits. (20)

Several authors in this book discuss how difficult it has been for women to gain a “voice” within the dominant discourse on school leadership to speak about gender and its continuing importance in both theory and practice in education. Hall (chapter 1) and Young (chapter 4), in particular, discuss how many people, both males and females, operate on assumptions that policies and practices have changed for the better and that women are actually being advantaged now in their efforts to become school leaders and in their work to bring

about gender equity in our schools at all levels. This book names that as a myth and provides international evidence to the contrary. It alerts the reader to the scope and complexity of the issues.

Presented here is an unprecedented compilation of current theories and perspectives on women and leadership issues in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools by several researchers who have gained stature in their own countries and internationally for their contributions to discourses about gender and school leadership. The About the Contributors section at the end of this book provides an overview of the breadth of their work. In her own way, each author has taken up the task of feminist deconstruction, that is,

the feminist project of revealing the powerfully insistent hegemony of public discourse in maintaining hierarchy and inequality and of contesting identities . . . and rewriting difference . . . [as] part of the “habit change” or ways of thinking things differently within established ground. It emerges from those gaps endemic to all discourse, which are neither, stable, constant, nor absolute. (Luke 1990, .26)

Like the men and women they have studied, the authors illustrate “convergence and divergence of opinion,” and their common interests in this topic “never serve to obliterate their individuality” (Kinnear 1995). They have used various methods to gather and analyze data, and they hold diverse theoretical positions. Coming from different countries, these women authors often use different spelling conventions and ways of speaking and writing. The authors work within “feminisms” rather than a single, easily classified version of feminist inquiry and theorizing. Like all research, the work presented here is not meant to be all-encompassing or to be the final word on the topic. On the contrary, the collection challenges the reader to consider both the partiality of all perspectives on leadership and future directions for research and practice.

Taken together, the chapters in this book present an international “state of the art” for research on women school leaders emanating from five selected nations where this topic has received some degree of currency and interest. This book should increase one’s appreciation of the complexities of the tensions that people of both gender groups encounter as they accept and/or resist dominant models for school leaders. This book crosses international borders, but it also brings together views of schools and school systems at the macro level, with discussions and case studies focused on the micro level of school life. Local and global perspectives are connected and located in particular times and places. The authors avoid a romanticized progressivism that advocates an ever-improving situation with regard to issues concerning gender and leadership. Instead, they focus on the need for critical reflections that reveal hidden aspects of leadership phenomena. They advocate diverse forms of positive action to improve the situation for women in school settings.

The authors of the various chapters discuss a number of common themes. One such theme is the importance of historical context. Looking across differing contexts, the chapters illuminate patterns that persist and the ways in which change occurs. Organizational structures and contextual factors offer particular options or “scripts.” Individual women and men make decisions regarding the taking up of available scripts within the teaching profession based on what they see as possible and desirable at a given time and place. Their decisions are not merely idiosyncratic and “free” choices, however. Economic, political, and social factors encourage certain choices over others, and thus leadership roles in schools can be viewed as highly “gendered,” both in terms of who decides to take up the role and how they come to enact that role in a specific context.

Another common theme, almost the flip side to observations about gendered patterns of school leadership, is the claim that there is as much variation within gender groups as there is across gender groups. Taken as a whole, the chapters illustrate the multiplicity of individual responses observed when women leaders are the focus of inquiry. The authors consider how women are affected by the current educational climate, and they offer several suggestions for how we might proceed in the future, given what we know about the past and the present.

In various ways, the chapters speak to the positive results and unintended consequences of a feminist agenda for change in schools in several Western nations since the 1970s. While having participated in that feminist agenda in various ways themselves, the authors offer critical reflections about past efforts and suggest more fruitful paths for the future. One such path is the controversial area of “entrepreneurship” in schools and universities. What does it mean for men and women to take up school leadership in today’s climate? This book is designed to enhance the international flavor of the reader’s knowledge base in this area and may introduce the reader to new authors and perspectives.

LIMITATIONS

The initial symposium and this book were limited by several pragmatic factors. It was not possible to be all-inclusive in terms of providing input from all of the persons who have made a substantial contribution to the field regarding the topic of women and leadership in education. Although the works here are somewhat representative of the bulk of the international literature base in English on this topic, many voices and perspectives are missing. Perhaps most obvious are limitations resulting from works from only five Western nations. The authors do not speak directly to the experiences of women throughout Europe, Asia, South America, Africa, the Middle East or to the wide variety of developing countries or those in Arctic regions or other parts of the globe. Much of what is written here, however, may indeed be applicable to those con-

texts or may spur questions concerning differences between women's experiences of school leadership within and across a variety of settings.

Also notable is the fact that all of the authors are white women currently working in an academic setting, which in itself situates them in certain sets of relations in terms of such factors as social class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Undercurrents can be found in many of the chapters regarding age, class, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, physical abilities, and other aspects that often are confounding factors in terms of discussions of gender. These are frequently not highlighted in the general literature on women school leaders, and they are not highlighted in this book either. You will note, however, that many suggested questions for further study point to the importance of increasing our knowledge in these areas.

FORMAT OF THE BOOK

This book is presented in a format designed to facilitate the identification of the main questions posed and discussed, as well as those raised for future study. I introduce each of the three sections and provide a list of suggested further readings at the end of the book.

READERSHIP

Who will find this book of value? It is designed to speak to the interests of those studying and/or participating in educational leadership. It will be of particular interest to undergraduate or graduate students in the areas of women's studies, psychology, sociology, education, politics, or business. Many women and men who have taken on leadership roles may be curious about the experiences of leaders in school settings around the globe. They may wish to confirm their own interpretations of events and their reactions to them. They also may want to consider new perspectives or learn about theories that strive to explain connections between gender and leadership in various contexts. Thus the material here could provide an important form of personal and professional development, and it could help individuals formulate research questions that would move this area in fruitful new directions.

This book is relevant to both male and female readers, because it sheds light on the hidden role of gender in complex social structures and interactions in schools. Everyone concerned with social justice and equity issues can learn from the discourse on women school leaders. The December 1998 issue of the American journal *Educational Researcher* focused on affirmative action policy and the limited progress made in the United States and elsewhere with regard to gender equity. This book contributes to that discussion and adds the voices of women from around the world who have shared concerns about equity and

how we might achieve it, given the current social climate within our school systems at all levels. The authors hope to encourage new directions for further inquiry and to impress upon the reader the urgency for continuing to ask new questions. This is crucial, since much of the current context, according to authors such as Linda McQuaig (1998), seems to encourage what she calls a “cult of impotence” that mitigates against hopeful action and leads instead to a resigned acceptance of the status quo.

NOTE

1. A full discussion of women’s movement into teaching as one of several gendered professional sectors in Western countries is provided by Kinnear (1995).

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