Walking between Two Worlds

Indigenous Women and Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Theory and research in the field of educational leadership and management has grown exponentially in the past decade. I am troubled however by the apparent primacy of ethnocentric ways of knowing, acting and leading. And while we might heed Dimmock and Walker's call for a cross-cultural approach to leadership and management, located at the periphery are bodies of knowledge for/about Indigenous ways of leading and being led. This article reports on a three-year research project conducted in New Zealand, Australia and Canada for/with Indigenous women. Evidence points to the triple bind Indigenous women face due to exigencies of race and gender and the two worlds they occupy; the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous.

KEYWORDS diversity, gender, Indigenous women, leadership

Introduction

Theory and research in the field of educational management has turned its attention to systematically questioning the absence of gender in scholastic debates and the under representation of women in school leadership positions (Blackmore, 2002; Coleman, 2001; Shakeshaft, 1987). In the main, leadership has become the 'technology of the masculine' (Theobald, 1996: 174). These and other studies have pinpointed several dominant themes that assist with explanations regarding the challenges women leaders face. The historical development of complex schooling systems funded and controlled by the state has stimulated the separation of teaching and administration. This has created the presumption that women were particularly suited to teaching in the nation's classrooms and men were naturally equipped to manage and lead bureaucracies (Theobald, 1996). The reform of educational administration that occurred from the late 1980s has re-structured schools and arguably reinforced assumptions regarding links between 'good' schools and 'good' (male) leaders (Blackmore, 1999). Thirdly, feminist perspectives have had a limited effect on changing constructions of leading and managing in education (Blackmore,
2002) and, consequently, discussions of gender and power issues have been difficult to surface (Shakeshaft, 1987; Strachan, 1999). Despite the introduction of legislation designed to address gender imbalances in the workplace, women remain under represented in leadership and management positions. That is, gender plays a significant role in limiting access and opportunity. What barriers are therefore erected if doubly challenged by gender and ethnicity?

There are several arguments that this article will traverse. First, I briefly examine increasing demands for global solutions to complex educational problems to argue for the rightful place of the ‘local’ and attention to diversity and difference in our theorising and practice. Second, I caution against the production of homogenous theories that have the potential to abandon calls for attention to diversity and difference in research and practice. The final section of this article reports on a three-year research project with Indigenous women in New Zealand, Australia and Canada that sought to highlight the experiences of Indigenous women leaders. In particular, the Indigenous women commented on the challenges of ‘walking between two worlds’ as women and as Indigenous women.

**Global or Local?**

Since 1988, educational administration and the nature of educational work particularly in the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand has undergone widespread and systemic reform. While on the one hand these reforms were predicated on the need to re-conceptualize education as a market commodity (Smyth, 1993; Thrupp, 2001), there was a concurrent focus on leadership as one of the critical elements in the drive to improve standards (Gronn, 2003). One of the direct consequences was that schools and their leaders have been required to shape their policies and practices according to the stated (and at times not stated) demands of government and its agencies, parents and community (Glatter, 1999). This has resulted in conservative and competing demands that have radically altered the educational environment that teachers, students and educational leaders occupy (Court, 1998; Gronn, 2003).

Despite serious limitations in terms of the complexities of the social, economic, cultural and political circumstances of each country, schools have imported and borrowed policy and practices from the global community in their attempts to resolve multifaceted educational problems (Dimmock and Walker, 2000; Thrupp, 2001). An immediate consequence of globalisation and increasing calls for schools to internationalise their work (Walker and Dimmock, 2000), is, as Jones (1998: 149) succinctly points out, the erosion of sovereignty and the notion of statehood. Arguably the pressure for schools to gain competitive advantage in an internal arena (or market), whereby the ‘local’ is abandoned for the ‘global’, has the potential to reduce concerns for diversity and difference in the pursuit of policies and practices that promote assimilation.
There have been calls for the field of educational leadership and management to reflect the ‘globalising and internationalising of policy and practice’ (Walker and Dimmock, 2000: 228) and for practitioners and academics to consider an international perspective on their roles, responsibilities and tasks (Foskett and Lumby, 2003). The development of comparative approaches to the field from a range of contexts, histories and cultures and an abandonment of an ethnocentric world view (Dimmock and Walker, 2000; Foskett and Lumby, 2003) is not possible. Despite the rhetoric that cross-cultural monologues can be produced, differential access to schooling experienced by minority communities as well as social, political, economic and cultural inequalities will firmly remain (Apple, 2001) unless we question the homogenous assumptions that underpin such narratives. The challenge therefore is to shift the focus from how the field of educational leadership and management might develop a comparative or cross-cultural perspective, and to critically question the fundamental knowledge and knowledge claims that connect and organize schools, schooling, leaders and leadership (Gunter and Ribbins, 2002).

There have been a number of thoughtful studies that point to the potential importance of a comparative dimension in the field of educational management and leadership (Bush, 2004; Dimmock and Walker, 2000; Foskett and Lumby, 2003). Similarly, Crossley (2000: 324) suggests ‘it is now increasingly difficult to understand education in any context without reference to the global forces that influence policy and practice’. These global forces, as Thrupp (2003), Apple (1999, 2001), Blackmore (1999), Smyth (1993) and others comment, privilege the market and its consequent commodification of knowledge, individuals, communities and schools. Neither the local/national nor the global/inter-national market is connected with or organized around the interests and lives of those from minority groups. Schools function to serve the interests of dominant groups (Apple, 2001) and those who benefit the least occupy marginal positions. Accordingly, it is more difficult to be recognized and speak from the margins.

One of the tensions that inevitably arise as a consequence of calls for a more outward looking focus is that the spotlight is shifted from the local to the global. My primary concern therefore is that calls for globalization are a call for the inculcation of western values, practices and privileges (Apple, 2001) that serve to homogenize and standardise and simultaneously segregate, stratify and marginalize. We should therefore be rightly concerned about the effects of globalization and internationalization and the inequalities this has the capacity and capability to produce. Furthermore, we should continue to voice our disquiet about ways in which schools have adopted policies and practices that are managerialist (Thrupp and Willmott, 2003) and place pressure on demands for uniformity and conformity thereby negating differences and diversity. The search for global solutions for national educational problems is not, in my view, the way to proceed. Although we might remain mindful of the globalized world, I would like to echo Bush’s (2004) call for national solutions for global problems.
Taking this further, national solutions for national problems points to the suggestion that the local does have a rightful place in our theorizing.

The institutionalization of policies and practices that provide opportunities to gain competitive advantage on an international stage has simultaneously restructured and re-gendered educational work (Blackmore, 2002). Troubling are the expectations and oblique messages that schools and their leaders know, understand and portray best practice that requires a constant state of visibility of actions, outcomes and practices. The pedagogy of leadership suggests that it is possible to ‘produce’ (Gronn, 2003) a universal leader or indeed, a universal ‘sister’ (Rigg and Trehan, 1999). The construct of the universal leader and the universal sister, as I have argued elsewhere (Fitzgerald, 2003a, 2003b), are inevitably raced and classed. Less recognized is the way in which whiteness is a privileging construct that perpetuates power and authority and which prevents access and opportunity for minority groups and, more specifically, women of colour.

There is a fundamental risk that in developing cross-cultural or comparative approaches we fail, yet again, to recognize the homogenization of theory and practice and the taken-for-granted assumption that diversity and difference is primarily about race, ethnicity and identity of those other than white. Whiteness is, at times, as Apple (1999) argues, too often an absent presence in our dialogue, theorising and practice. Arguably, the recognition of race as a category of analysis, however contested, complex and difficult, provides for the possibly of heterogeneous responses to educational problems at the local level. How then might we account for diverse ways of knowing, leading and managing that do not homogenize and standardize and which recognize and conserve individual identity?

**Diversity and Leadership**

Available theoretical and empirical studies on women and educational leadership (Blackmore, 1999; Coleman, 2001; Court, 1998; Ozga, 1993; Strachan, 1999) contribute to an understanding of the broader socio-political environment in which women as leaders operate as a numerical minority. The central focus of these studies is the way in which women leaders face occupational and professional challenges and the various personal and professional strategies employed to acquire positions and exercise leadership. In particular these studies draw attention to ways in which women inevitably exercise leadership in schools. Arguments that ‘gender matters in educational leadership’ (Blackmore and Kenway, 1993) risk producing a narrative that suggests women leaders share a collective identity based on their gender and their common experiences and struggles. More specifically, the creation of the possibility that a universal sisterhood (Rigg and Trehan, 1999) exists is further predicated on western traditions of leadership, power and privilege. There are however, considerably more studies on women and leadership than on women of colour.
and leadership. Debate for/about women of colour are beginning to raise new questions (Dillard, 2000; Essed, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2003b) and challenge the ethnocentricity of our thinking. It is dangerous to assume that women exhibit the same traits, characteristics and behaviours of male leaders; it is equally dangerous to assume that women of colour can be compared to either men or women. Conceptualising research on leadership as a mirror in which women of colour are a reflection of either white male or female leaders is theoretically flawed and draws attention away from central issues of power, authority and differences across and between lines of gender and ethnicity.

There is a growing body of literature on cultural diversity and leadership (Bajunid, 1996; Gunew, 1994; Jones, Pringle and Shepherd, 2000) that re-conceptualises and re-constructs ways of knowing and leading from a minority standpoint. Although women leaders (as a group) might experience a sense of belonging to a minority, for women of colour and in particular, Indigenous women, they are a minority group in a minority setting (Fitzgerald, 2003a). Consequently, Indigenous women face a double bind (Blackmore, 1999); as women in hierarchies dominated in the main by white men and, as women in a marginal position due to the numerical dominance of white women (Alston, 2000; Dillard, 2000; Essed, 2000). The assumption is created therefore that ‘minority school systems are the appropriate places for minority administrators’ (Yeakey et al., 1986: 124). A further troubling aspect is that Indigenous women are expected to engage in ‘mammy work’ (Collins, 1998: 49) as well as the politics of identity and community (Essed, 2000). That is, Indigenous women are deemed responsible and accountable for all children of colour in the school, yet similar demands are not made of their non-Indigenous colleagues. Being Indigenous is co-opted by schools as a reason for Indigenous women in particular to focus on working with Indigenous children and communities on Indigenous issues.

In recent years, studies have been conducted that specifically report on black women in educational management (Alston, 1999; McGee Banks, 2000; Ong, 1988). One criticism of this literature is that all women of colour are labelled as one group thereby negating their distinctiveness based on ethnicity, family, geographical location, language, social and familial relationships, knowledge, spirituality, philosophy and aspiration (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). What is known is that women from minority groups are underrepresented both in the research and in leadership positions and that these women occupy two unique positions—one related to gender and one related to ethnicity. Arguably too, while the intersection of gender and ethnicity might present its own challenges, moving between an Indigenous and non-Indigenous world raises a different set of tensions. There are several intriguing questions to be raised. First, is there a connection between the relatively low numbers of Indigenous women in leadership roles (Fitzgerald, 2003b) and the limited number of research accounts of Indigenous women leaders? Second, does research that highlights the under representation of Indigenous women in leadership roles in education...
make this visible? To what extent does this under representation also serve as a departure point for action to rectify this?

Discussing differences and distinctiveness within the scope of educational leadership is complicated, contested and dangerous terrain. Partially this is because it is a taken-for-granted assumption that difference, diversity and distinctiveness immediately refers to identification with a particular ethnic group. Race, ethnicity and gender are, as Cynthia Dillard (2000: 670) suggests, ‘slippery constructs’. And how might these multiplicities of identity contribute to a broader understanding of the exercise of educational leadership within diverse settings? While feminist research might assist with deciphering common gender differences and experiences, discussions surrounding race and ethnicity are ideologically and methodologically more complex. One of the ways forward is to engage in cross-cultural research that is meaningful for participant, researcher and community/audience (Fitzgerald, 2004; Somerville and Perkins, 2003).

**Indigenous Women and Leadership**

In post-colonial countries such as New Zealand, Australia and Canada, the construction, production and legitimation of research for/about Indigenous communities has been the subject of intense and widespread debates. Quite rightly, Indigenous communities remain concerned about research into their lives, their control over and participation in the research process and the public dissemination of knowledge (Smith, 1999). Frequently located as the Indigenous Other (Marker, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2000), research activities have, in the main, positioned the (white) ‘expert’ from the Academy in a powerful role (Fitzgerald, 2004). In similar ways to judgements made concerning Māori women’s role in contemporary society, there have been a number of silences and discourses of privilege (Fitzgerald, 2003b) that have served to produce a universal and homogenous account of leadership by women of colour (Essed, 2000). It is neither possible nor permissible to produce such an account.

In 2002 four Māori women school principals invited me to undertake a research project that documented their professional biographies and highlighted their experiences as educational leaders. The women were concerned that they were not able to read about their own experiences of school leadership in either the academic journals or professional publications. This project was extended in 2003 to include three Aboriginal women from Australia and three First Nations women from Canada joined the group in 2004. Aroha, one of the New Zealand participants, approached me to participate as a researcher:

We asked you to work with us because we need your voice. If we get out there and talk about how we have to advocate for our tamariki [children], for our people and for our future we get known as ‘radicals’. We’re not, we know what we need to do...
but getting it done is hard. That's why we came to you. You have an understanding of nga mea Māori [things Māori] and we know you will listen and guide us get to where we want to be.

During the past three years I have crossed a number of borders (Somerville and Perkins, 2003), geographically, intellectually and culturally, to conduct interviews and meet the challenges that the comments from Aroha (above) illustrate. As a Pakeha (white) academic from Ireland, I was intensely unsettled by the invitation that was extended. Although my pragmatic response was to accept the invitation and the possibilities such an invitation offered, I was deeply concerned that I may not have been an appropriate person to become involved in such a project and that Indigenous colleagues would (rightly) contest my participation. Unsettled too because I did not want to be positioned by the academy and Pakeha academics as ‘expert’ due in part to the research work and my involvement with Indigenous communities. Despite these anxieties, I was excited about the invitation to engage in ‘more culturally Indigenous ways of knowing research’ (Dillard, 2000: 661), and not merely to ‘talk up’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2000) or ‘talk back’ (hooks, 1989), from the outset the positions and voices of the participants shaped and defined the project.

Gender plays a significant role in the construction of leadership and research agendas (Blackmore, 2002; Shakeshaft, 1987). Gender and ethnicity simultaneously present a dual challenge (McGee Banks, 2000) that have the potential to create a unique set of tensions and barriers. Paula (Canada), one of the research participants, commented:

I’m going to be judged on Western values. Therefore I’m trying to work within two systems I suppose. But it’s more than that you know. I am trying to work within two systems but I am also a woman in a white man’s world. It’s pretty lonely at times. It also means I am judged by Western values and the values placed on male leaders. Then again, I can be judged as a woman. Somehow that doesn’t seem fair. I feel that I am always walking between two worlds.

As these comments highlight, Indigenous women ‘walk’ and work ‘within two systems’ (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and are ‘judged as a woman’ in a ‘white man’s world’. Women in leadership positions are subject to constraints regarding [men’s] ways of knowing and leading (Blackmore, 2002; Ozga, 1993) and are deemed to be ‘trouble’ in their challenges to hegemonic practices (Blackmore, 1999). Consequently, Indigenous women, as Paula has indicated, face a triple bind. First, they are Indigenous women in a predominantly white world and, second, are women in systems that value patriarchal leadership. Third, Indigenous women are also subject to the judgments of ‘others’; all males, white males and white women. Paula’s comments therefore emphasize the juxtaposition of gender and ethnicity. As Indigenous women leaders, the women were placed in a minority setting according to their gender (women within a world dominated by men), their ethnicity (Indigenous women in a
non-Indigenous world) and as women of colour in a white woman’s world. A number of barriers further complicated this triple bind:

The school was a very white organisation. Aboriginal people really didn’t have much chance. I used to observe the teachers and watch what they were doing and how is it that they can do it but I can’t do it . . . They seemed to have all the privileges and benefits but we didn’t have any. And I wanted access to all that so although it was a challenge, I decided I wanted to be principal. (Anne, Australia)

Why do you have to play games? And unless you sell yourself, nobody is going to come up to you and say—you’ve really got a lot experience there or qualifications. I think, you know, you would be ideal for something like this. Nobody does that. So if you are not one who promotes yourself, then I think the opportunities are a lot less. (Paula, Canada)

I had to fight for my job. I think the Board did not want to appoint me because I was a woman and not Pakeha [white]. I think they were afraid of a backlash. (Aroha, NZ)

As indicated by Anne, Paula and Aroha, ethnicity and gender operated to place these women on the margins of the organization. This position and positional-ity began at the time of appointment and created a number of difficulties. More specifically, comments were made concerning the lack of positive support from non-Indigenous communities and the ‘backlash’ (Aroha, NZ) because ‘I am not white like them’ (Sue, Canada):

It was a token job really and I just kept fighting them, bureaucracy. I was sort of like the meat in a sandwich. I was fighting bureaucracy and trying to do something for my own mob, you know. Management doesn’t allow you to do things. I mean I had no room to be innovative or even if I wanted to use my own initiative it was usually—what do you want to do that for? So I moved out and left them to it. (Barbara, Australia)

I think the school community was waiting for me to make a mistake. It would not have mattered if it had been a small mistake or something that the media ultimately got hold of. I think they all doubted my abilities because I was the first woman principal. In a way, I could cope with that. What I could not cope with was the unspoken belief that I would ‘be like the others’—someone said that to me once—what he meant was he thought I would ‘stuff up like all Māori’. I don’t think he would have said that if I was a Pakeha man and probably not if I had been a Pakeha woman. (Jane, NZ)

These extracts further illustrate the dual challenges of being Indigenous and being a woman. Milliken and Martins (1996) have noted that emotional response is usually stronger and prejudice more likely in any situation in which difference (for example, colour of skin) is more visible. Furthermore, being in a minority is more pronounced when there is a (white) majority present (Ely, 1994). Minority is more visible in the presence of a majority. Yet at times, and due in part to the absence of Indigenous colleagues, the women tapped into
networks of female teachers. For example, Anne (Australia) expressed the following view:

I've always enjoyed the company of women, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and that's always been a very powerful factor in my life and in my development, — you know, when you talk about working things, — I find it much easier to sit down with a woman, talk about an issue, and just go and talk through it, and it's definitely calming.

In terms of their day-to-day work, the Indigenous women indicated that they had a deep compassion and commitment to community and that this created a unique set of challenges:

If you're not an Indigenous person, you go to work and you go home and that's fine. But with us, you go to work, what we do at work—especially if you work in like a place, organisation, involved with Indigenous issues, you know—what we do here impacts on a community, and a community then feel they have a right to be involved, and rightly so, in a lot of issues. Like we're doing things that—and part of the whole thing is, you know, we're benefiting the community. We should be willing to hear what they're saying and doing. So we're doing a whole lot. (Shirley, Australia)

It's probably for me this feeling with Aboriginal people—and a lot of us have the— have the same sort of issues we need to deal with. A lot of Aboriginal people feel very much we're on a big trial. I think racism is systemic and non-Aboriginal people still have the power and control. (Anne, Australia)

Honestly, I think I'd still be cleaning schools if my whanaunga [relatives] had not challenged me to take up some opportunities. And here I am now, the school principal, but I still have cleaners that are whanau [family]. (April, NZ).

Community expectations, responsibilities and accountability placed considerable demands on the Indigenous women. Although each recognised that ‘taking work home’ was an integral aspect of the role, none was able to ‘leave being Aboriginal’ (Sue, Canada) or ‘abandon my self and those who have come before me’ (Jane, NZ) at the school door. As educational leaders, the women held to the belief that their work ‘belong[ed] to more people than myself’ (Diane, Canada). Each of the women represented a specific community and that there was a high degree of reciprocity required and that ‘my mob would have a thing or two to say if I didn't meet their expectations’ (Anne, Australia).

A reading of the above extracts would further suggest that the Indigenous women placed themselves in a dichotomous relationship with ‘them’, the distanced ‘other’. This ‘othering’ was a strategy that was designed to reinforce the Indigenous women’s identity and their role as leaders that ultimately positioned ‘them’ in oppositional ways (hooks, 1989). It was impossible however for the women to reject ‘memories of privilege and subordination’ (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000: 28) or:
the historical events that happened, which included right from the beginning, you know, genocide and all its policies and acts which were extremely oppressive. (Shirley, Australia)

It was just too painful to talk about things. And it's trying to insure, you know, their stories are told and people are aware that, you know, often—of the hardships faced by Indigenous people and tied in there is the racial aspect as well. You know, you can't get away from that. (Barbara, Australia).

One of the ways Barbara (Australia) revealed to cope with these dual challenges and the ‘walking between two worlds’ (Paula, Canada) was to engage in a process whereby she re-invented herself in an attempt to overcome the dual challenges:

And that's a real struggle on a day-to-day basis but also I don't know that a lot of people are aware of what actually occurs in an Indigenous person. What happens, and I'm speaking from my experience, is that you're talking in non-Indigenous language. Even though they don't speak a traditional language, we have our own way of speaking English. You know, meanings attached to the words we use and the way we use it. And you're talking in standard Australian English with all its meaning and customs and everything behind it, it goes into your head, in your head you have to somehow make sense of the English, find out what it means, then sort of fit it in with your own Aboriginal understanding of English. So all these processes are going on in your head. Then you have to translate it back into standard Australian English and the meanings and everything, then feed it back out again. Which is a very lengthy and trying and tiring process. So actually things don't move as quickly because you are actually creating a new person if you like. (Barbara, Australia)

‘Walking between two worlds' involved interpreting ‘the games' (Paula, Canada) that operated in a 'white man's world' (Paula, Canada) and ‘very white organisation[s]' (Anne, Australia) in order to fulfil commitments to community and whanau (family). The ‘struggle on a day-to-day basis' (Barbara, Australia) centred on 'power and control' (Anne, Australia) that was exercised by white men and women that stimulated ‘creating a new person' (Barbara, Australia).

Conclusion

I do not wish to paralyse our theorizing by suggesting that there is a universal way in which Indigenous women lead and manage. The above extracts suggest that there are similarities between/among the Indigenous women who participated in this project. My caution is that we cannot assume that a meta-narrative is possible and to invent such a discourse would be dangerous. The voices of the women participants highlight the particular circumstances of Indigenous women's leadership at a particular point in time. Evident from their voices is that gender and ethnicity do matter in educational leadership and management and that ‘walking between two worlds' is complicated, contested and difficult terrain.
My concluding comment is taken from one of the participants who aptly provides a summary of the key themes that this article has traversed:

I was thinking too about leadership and management for women. I don’t know that—it’s almost like women have to make that extra effort to get into positions of leadership and management. You don’t sort of seem to get the opportunities, you know. It’s almost like there’s a criteria you have to meet in order to get into any of those positions—it’s almost like you have to play this dance, this game or something. You know, it’s almost like you’ve got to demonstrate some manly qualities, you know, you also need to show you have white qualities. It’s much harder for Aboriginal women. We don’t make it hard for ourselves. Sure we have self-doubt but I think non-Aboriginal people deliberately and unintentionally make it harder for us because we are women and because we are Aboriginal. And then when you get into positions of power and authority you are expected to solve all the Aboriginal problems and have an answer about every Aboriginal issue. And you know, I don’t know all the rules all of the time. Sometimes I don’t know or am not even sure what game it is I am expected to play. (Anne, Australia)

Note
1. For the purposes of this article, Indigenous refers to those people and communities that have direct links with the land. In New Zealand this refers to tangata whenua (people of the land); in Australia this refers to the traditional owners of the land and in Canada to the First Peoples of that nation. The use of a capital ‘I’ for the term Indigenous is quite deliberate and recognises the primacy of Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

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