Constructions of leadership: Does gender make a difference? Perspectives from an English speaking country

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The dominant construct of 'leadership' in the English speaking world is bound by a masculinist construct associated with aggressiveness, forcefulness, competitiveness and independence. However, there are other constructions of leadership that may legitimate the experiences and aspirations of leaders in early childhood settings. This paper investigates constructions of leadership that arise from research and theory into women's preferred ways of leading. It invites early childhood researchers and teachers to consider such alternatives in redefining leadership so that such alternatives are regarded as legitimate and appropriate for early childhood leaders.

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For several years I have taught courses in leadership and management in early childhood. The participants in these courses are mostly supervisors in childcare centres, head teachers in kindergartens and family daycare co-ordinators. For many of them, there is a tension between the way that they feel that they should lead, and the way in which they want to lead. On one hand, their job description may be written in a way that designates sole accountability to them, and this style of leadership may be reinforced by the meetings with their Board of Management, and the reports of the monitoring body, the Educational Review Office. On the other hand, their early childhood experience may have made them feel that leaders should encourage cooperation and leadership should be shared. This paper investigates how our ideas about leadership have been developed, and explores an alternative framework for constructing leadership.

1. Where do our ideas about leadership come from?

"Common knowledge" tells us that leaders are born rather than made; that they have a distinct "charismatic" or hero quality; and that they have particular attributes such as intelligence, imagination, perseverance, emotional adjustment, self confidence, authority and good health. It follows that if particular personalty traits showed up in effective leaders, it would be possible to predict who would be good leaders before they began, and time and money could be saved by appointing the right people. Yet over 600 studies, done between 1920 and 1960, have shown no systematic relationship between personality traits and ability in leadership (Owens 1998). The only traits that were consistently evident were intelligence and energy. Researchers have concluded that it is impossible to predict effective leadership from studying traits. Yet these ideas are still prevalent in leadership theory, and we should ask why.

Theories of leadership characteristics and behaviour are historically based on a view of organisations and relationships that originates in what Charol Shakeshaft refers to as “male based knowledge” (Shakeshaft 1989, 147). Jill Blackmore points out that the writers of organisational theory, whether trait theorists, behaviourists, or situational theorists, may differ as to whether such behaviour can be learned and on the importance of the situation, but they all describe leadership as characterised by the masculinist traits of ‘aggressiveness, forcefulness, competitiveness and independence’ (Blackmore 1989, 100).

In her analysis of the cultural construction of gender and gender relations in educational administration Marian Court uses the ideas of the Australian sociologist Bob Connell (1987) to argue that

“*In Western societies, … the predominant images and practices of masculinty are toughness, power and strength associated with a competitive, confident spirit and "an ability to dominate others and face down opponents in situations of conflict. …In commonsense beliefs about gender, the ability to be logical and to "figure things out in political, organisational and financial areas - has been more closely associated with mascunlinity than femininity*” (Court 1994, 10–11.)

While she acknowledges that all male leaders do not behave like this, she argues that these principles sustain and underpin their power within organisational theory.

Much of the material on women’s leadership focuses on similar characteristics of aggressiveness/dominance, emotional control/sound judgment, confidence and self-esteem, and considers that women without these characteristics are not suitable to be leaders. Penny Gosetti and Edith Rusch point out that the status gained by both men and women who succeed under this system means that they tend not to question the underlying assumptions, and the myth of what makes a successful administrator is perpetuated (Gosetti & Rusch 1995, 20). In addition, the construction of leadership that is seen as appropriate under the New Public Management (mangerialism), with its emphasis on line management and accountability reinforces the dominant discourse of leadership. Thus women, who are the topic of this paper, have been encouraged to model their leadership behaviour on ideas about successful leadership that are derived from male models and from research carried out on men in leadership principally in a business environment, with implications of success being measured

through competition, profit making and an ethos of competition. As I have noted at the beginning of this paper, many women, especially in early childhood, struggle with this.

Sharon Kagan and Barbara Bowman (1997) have challenged us to look further afield for our ideas on leadership. In the preface to *Leadership in Early Education and Care* (Kagan & Bowman 1997) which endeavours to provide a forum for the discussion of "current understandings" of leadership in early childhood, they identify as an issue in leadership the slowness of the field in understanding and interpreting findings and theory from other fields. While acknowledging that in the past leadership theory may not have been appropriate to early childhood because of its hierarchical, top down orientation they feel that the more modern leadership approaches support collaborative leadership and respect the role of gender in leadership development; these are more in concert with early childhood principles and practices (5–6).

Despite this statement, the references for the articles in this book are either from the early childhood field or from the field of management. Most often cited from management are Warren Bennis (1993) *On becoming a leader;* Peter Senge (1990) *The fifth discipline;* and Howard Gardner (1995a) *Leading minds* and *On leadership* (1995b). Except for one mention of Sally Helgeson (1990) *The female advantage: women's ways of leadership,* there is no mention of the growing literature on women in leadership, either in business or in education. The use of literature and research based on men's experience is still prevalent.

2. Research and theory on women in leadership

In describing a women"s culture in educational administration in the US, Charol Shakeshaft (1989) says that it is based on Carol Gilligan's Ethic of Caring (Gilligan, 1982). The perspective is of the morality of response and care, which emphasises maintaining relationships and promoting the welfare of others, whereas the male world uses the perspective of the morality of justice which emphasises individualism, duty and rules. Shakeshaft's research, which was carried out on 600 administrators in schools in the United States, reflected this. It showed that, in the world of women in administration in schools, relationships with others were central to all actions — women communicated more, motivated more, spent more time with marginal teachers and students: morale was higher and relations with parents were more favourable. Teaching and learning were the main foci: a school climate was developed that was conducive to learning, emphasising instructional programmes and student progress. The women's style was democratic, participatory and encouraged inclusiveness, and they encouraged a broad view of the curriculum and the whole child. On a more personal level, however, a feeling of marginality overlaid their daily work life: they were always aware of the misogyny of the male world. Further, the line separating the public from the private world was blurred. Women, she found, behave similarly in the public and private spheres whereas men are unlikely to do so (ibid., 197–8).

Shakeshaft points out that the characteristics of women's ways of leadership fit in with the ideas of how to run successful schools. She says that research shows that principals of successful schools, whether women or men, have a clear vision that focuses on children and their needs, establish appropriate cultures, and monitor and intervene when necessary. They emphasise achievement, set instructional

strategies, provide an orderly atmosphere, frequently evaluate student progress, co-ordinate instructional programmes and support teachers. Shakeshaft alleges that women's leadership style is conducive to promoting good schooling: they have clear educational goals supported by a value system that stresses service, caring and relationships; they are focussed on instructional and educational issues and build a supportive atmosphere; and they monitor, intervene and evaluate more than men. She is supported in this view by Tom Sergiovanni (1992). It is interesting to note that Gosetti and Rusch feel that transformational leadership, which emphasises participation and consensus building, is rendering these leadership characteristics genderless so that they are merging into the male model. They argue that men are co-opting women's style without acknowledging its source.

Valerie Hall (1996), researching women in leadership in English schools, found that they favoured "power for rather than power over": that is, power to empower or shared power, particularly with senior colleagues. Typically, they saw power as the ability to make things happen. They also preferred development goals and aimed to create organisational cultures characterised by trust, openness, involvement and a sense of self worth. They showed a commitment to children as well as to education, and had made lifestyle choices that had enabled them to combine their work and their private lives. Nevertheless they were:

"*committed to the belief that sharing leadership still required them to take the lead when appropriate ... Their actions for these purposes were collaborative rather than directive but ... included clarifying the direction and ensuring people were reminded of where they were going".* (Hall 1996, 192.)

These findings about women in educational leadership are supported by research in New Zealand. From her study of 16 successful women in education, Neville (1988) has a similar list of leadership characteristics that include power sharing and empowering others, courage and risk taking, emphasis on the educative function, an ability to cope with trivia and a history of capable classroom action. Court (1994) found that the group of leading women in education whom she studied had a holistic, affiliative approach to leadership. They emphasised building relationships, shared decision making and the empowerment of others. They built learning environments through teamwork and open communication, and they emphasised their role in instructional leadership.

Court also points out that women face contradictory expectations in leadership and suggests that these may result from a stereotype of women as nurturant and relationship oriented:

"*They are surrounded by expectations that they will fill nurturant rather than authoritative leadership roles... yet they are also expected to lead. Their leadership is expected to employ consultation and democratic decision making strategies, yet these ways of working can often be interpreted as the leader 'not having a mind of her own' - perhaps she can't make up her mind?*" (Court 1994, 41.)

Similar findings come from research into women in women"s organisations, where findings are very relevant to early childhood, where the majority of staff (and leaders) are women. A study in New Zealand by Judith Pringle and Sharon Collins (1996) researched the organisational culture of 493 women"s organisations. More than half of the respondents in business organisations and two thirds of those in voluntary organisations described structures that were non-hierarchical, and about the same

percentage described leadership that was consultative and interactive. Many responses identified differences from when they had worked in male-run organisations. A typical positive response was:

"*…nurturing and supportive environment; warmth and understanding; women are more emotional; problems talked about more; flexibility especially re children support and family; can do several jobs at once; women tend to be more organised*" (Pringle & Collins 1996, 417.)

While being professional, efficient and service oriented were seen as important, process and nurturance was also emphasised, rather than the focus being entirely task oriented.

The construction of education as caring has been furthered in the United States by several writers. In particular, Noddings (1992) has argued from a feminist perspective that educational leaders should adopt the ethic of caring, in order to ensure that schools become caring communities that nurture all children, regardless of race, class, gender, ability. She epitomises these as Connections, Context and Concern. Following Noddings, Catherine Marshall et al. suggest that an ethic of caring

"*should emphasise connections through responsibility to others rather than rights and rules. It involves fidelity to relationships with others that is based on more than just personal liking or regard. An ethic if caring does not establish a list of guiding principles to blindly follow but rather a moral touchstone for decision making*" (Marshall *et al.* 1996, 277–8.)

Marshall and her associates investigated the ways in which school administrators operating from a perspective of an ethic of caring conducted their daily practice. These administrators were men as well as women; the use of a model derived from women"s theory is not, as we have seen, limited to women. She found that the administrators took pride in their ability to form connections, not only with students, but also with parents, community members and teachers. They tended to put people first and in their response to situations they considered everyone"s perspective. They cared about the well being of the people around them and were sensitive to individual circumstances, even when this perspective was opposed to the bureaucratic emphasis on universal rules and uniformity. But they were strong, assertive, confident people. Marshall quotes Noddings in saying that "there is nothing mushy about caring. It is the strong resilient backbone of human life" (Noddings 1992, 195).

3. Feminism and critical theory

Early childhood writers on leadership have also been influenced by some of the ideas of critical theory. For critical theorists, discussions of leadership imply concerns about power. Important concepts and considerations in such leadership theory are the relationship between leadership and the culture of the institution and the importance of an educational vision in transformative leadership.

Shirley Grundy (1993), theorising about women's leadership from a critical theory viewpoint, divides leadership practices into technical action, practical action and emancipatory praxis. The differences between these practices are typified by the way in which power is regarded. *Technical action* uses the bureaucratic language of outcomes, goals, implementation strategies and skills development. Principal interest is however, in 'control and the unequal distribution of power within the institutional setting'

(ibid., p 168). *Practical action* is exemplified by staff involvement, long term goals, shared leadership and facilitation. Grundy says that

"*The educational leader will, therefore, become a facilitator of the deliberating process rather than a designer of plans... The division of labour between the developer of action plans and the practitioner who enacts the plans will not be as distinct.*" (ibid., 169.)

In other words, "power over" has been replaced by "power for".

In examining the meaning of *emancipatory praxis*, Grundy says that the ideas for practical action will still hold, but 'judgment' and decisions about what is appropriate will be looked at within a' socially critical framework'. She provides ideas that are useful in a discussion of power relations, asserting that 'symmetrical communication' is essential to the equalisation of such relations. She suggests that symmetrical communication can be promoted by the development of group processes, including acknowledging unequal patterns of communication particularly those based on gender and status; developing a common group language based on shared meanings; and by sharing the responsibility for group organisation.

Grundy points out that addressing power relations within a framework of socially critical practice is not an easy option. Yet is it is possible. In a recent study of co-principalship in primary schools (ages 5–13) Marian Court has investigated shared leadership in a school culture based on collaboration and consultation. In this school, the principalship was shared. She points out that shared leadership is not a soft option, where little progress is made because it is difficult to make decisions:

"*Shared leadership is not about sharing out the workload or disabling the principal by enforcing "management by consensus". Shared leadership is not easier, but the combined effort makes it easier to focus on professional goals and not on personal agendas*" (Court 1998, 55.)

Thus within the feminist discourse, it is not enough to say that women will be better leaders if they are upskilled to meet the demands of managerialism, which emphasises competition, accountability and economic rationality. Blackmore (1999) points out that "educational leadership" (in schools) does not just apply to principals but is being constantly reconceptualised to include what is done by good classroom teachers, parents, and principals. She suggests that the reluctance of many women to accept formal leadership roles may be contingent upon their perception of "leadership" as something exceptional that only happens within bureaucratic structures. But as we have seen, this need not necessarily be so.

4. What might this mean for early childhood?

Diane Reay and Stephen Ball say:

"*It has been suggested that women are often more able to behave in supportive, caring ways at work because they are locked into low paid, low powered jobs. Such jobs, for example nursing and childcare, rarely require competitive ways of operating.*" (Reay & Ball 2000, 150–1.)

In the modern world this is scarcely true of childcare: many centre complexes are very large, and in New Zealand at least shortages of staff have made some jobs very well paid. Nor should competition be regarded as an essential part of leadership, though it is often something that we grapple with. Instead, much of the data about the characteristics of leadership style that early childhood practitioners aspire to speaks of a desire to share power, to work in an affiliative way and to support and advocate for the community. These ideas fit well with research on a preferred style that suits many women.

It is true that there has been an acknowledgment that research into women"s ideas about leadership could be useful for early childhood practitioners. For example, Rodd, in *Leadership in early childhood* (1998) suggests that the ideas of Valerie Hall are useful for early childhood leaders and Margy Whalley (1999) uses Judi Marshall"s framework of male and female values in passing in her analysis of leadership characteristics in early childhood practitioners. Libby Henderson-Kelly and Barbara Pamphilon (2000) suggest that women in early childhood are developing their own "perspectives, models and language" on leadership, based on feminist models.

But much of the research into leadership in early childhood suggests that there is still confusion in the minds of the leaders, particularly at centre level, about how they should construct leadership. Jillian Rodd (1997), writing about her research with early childhood professionals in Britain" describes their perceptions of leadership as "bolted on" to their daily work. The data from this research suggests that the participants have a fairly clear, though rather narrow, idea of what they think leadership is within the centre, but Rodd suggests that wider understanding of leadership in the early childhood field was not present. Perhaps, thinking of what Jill Blackmore has to say about leadership, their perception of "leadership" is still bound with ideas to do with "male-based knowledge: aggressiveness, forcefulness, competitiveness and independence and they do not see it as taking place at centre level.

To conclude, let us return to where this talk began: Jill Blackmore reminds us that

"*The dominant definition of educational leadership has been historically constructed in a manner which ignores, reinterprets or denigrates feminine values and experience.*" (Blackmore 1989, 113.)

Leaders in early childhood, especially at centre level, need to be aware of alternative frameworks for thinking about leadership that validate their experience and ideas. Early childhood does not have to endlessly assert 'we are different'. There are legitimate alternatives to masculinist, managerialist perspectives on leadership. This paper endeavours to suggest some such alternatives. I hope that the frameworks that we use for research and for teaching about leadership will ensure that such alternatives are regarded as legitimate and appropriate ways of leading.