Book Review

Troubling Women: Feminism, Leadership and Educational Change

JILL BLACKMORE (1999)
Open University Press
Buckingham: Philadelphia, 1999, 242 pages

The title of Jill Blackmore's book is an apt one. It nicely captures her dual aims of analysing concerns that trouble women in education, while herself troubling, theories of educational leadership and approaches to change. In wide ranging discussions that re-view and unsettle both masculinist and feminist theorising, Blackmore draws on historical socio-political analysis and research into the lives of individual teachers, principals and femocrats, to examine discriminatory features of gender bifurcated workforces and hierarchies in education. While not always easy reading because of the level of theoretical engagement it requires, the book is a particularly rich resource. For those new to this area, as well as for those who are wanting to see how a feminist poststructuralist and Foucauldian approach can be applied to the field of women in educational leadership, Part 1 provides theoretical overviews and challenges that will reward careful reading. For those who want to know how educational restructuring and the age of the global market are impacting on the work and experiences of women educators, Parts 2 and 3 contain much interesting and insightful material and analysis.

In Part 1 Blackmore firstly teases out the nature and consequences of an historically constructed gendered split between teaching, as a pedagogy of the feminine, and management, as a technology of the masculine. In earlier work (1989, 1993) she has explained how educational administration and leadership theory have become associated with particular forms of masculinity. She recaps some of these arguments in Chapter 1, where she traces the changing colours of masculinist authority as it has been constructed within the shifting socio-political contexts of colonial, bureaucratic and market forms of the state and educational governance in Australia. This analysis is very relevant for New Zealand readers. There are clear parallels between the formulations of the patriarchal masculinism of colonial governance, the paternalistic masculinism of welfare bureaucracy and the strategic, entrepreneurial masculinism of the corporate era, and the organisational forms and leadership practices that have occurred in Aotearoa/New Zealand (see, for example, the analyses in O'Neill, 1996; Strachan, 1999).

Blackmore then goes on to criticise educational administration for its maintaining of a masculinist power that is grounded not only in claims to "expert knowledge" in the form of "rationality and science" but also in "social control through normalising discourses or regimes of truth" (1999, p. 43). She argues that the effect of the latter is to marginalise and render illegitimate alternative views, especially those that give expression to the feminine. Blackmore maintains that the field of educational administration has remained largely immune to the more critical social movements, "reacting to external pressures by looking inward to produce better mechanisms of control, rather than looking outward on the basis of educational principles to inform social change" (p. 49). Her arguments can be illustrated in our country in the Ministry of Education's embedding of performance management systems into all sectors of education. Further, although feminist discourses did have some influence during the early development of

school charters in Aotearoa/New Zealand (see Middleton, 1992), within the conceptualising and policy of educational administration restructuring, feminism remained a largely ignored and subjugated discourse.

When she turns her discussion to looking at feminist approaches to leadership theory and practice, Blackmore does not flinch at troubling her own and other feminist researchers' earlier work. I liked the honesty of her debunking of some myths here. For example, in past studies of women in educational leadership, beginning with Shakeshaft's influential book, *Women in Educational Administration* (1987) there have been arguments that women's day-to-day experiences have led to their creation of a female culture that is somehow essentially different from the dominant male culture of administration. Some cultural feminists still maintain that women have natural skills of nurturance and caring that predispose them towards collaborative, power-sharing approaches. Although this kind of argument may hold a partial ring of truth, there are fairly obvious flaws in suggestions that all women have these predispositions (and by implication, no men). In her discussion of a cultural feminist discourse of women's ways of leading, Blackmore provides a helpful summary of some further problems in this approach to challenging gender discrimination in educational administration.

As part of her attempt to find a more useful way of understanding women's experiences, Blackmore uses a feminist poststructuralist approach to interpret her interviews with women educators about how they entered teaching and became feminists and/or leaders. She shows how the women she studied negotiated in different ways the so-called public/private split and gendered issues around professionalism and authority. Her analysis draws out how individual women were making sense of their experiences as professional educators and feminist change agents within cultural discourses of feminine domesticity.

In Part 2, Blackmore shifts her focus on to identifying and discussing some disruptive voices in educational policy making and implementation, and in analyses of masculinity. She critically examines some recent Australian equity policy, and reflects on the difficulties encountered in the work of equity femocrats and change agents. Having worked briefly as an EEO reviewer in schools in the Central District during 1990-1, I found that the latter accounts struck several chords. This can be a difficult and disheartening area of work, particularly when EEO is denigrated and resisted as social engineering, while hierarchical and controlling managerialism is construed as a benign organisational tool for improving efficiency, effectiveness and even sometimes, equity! Blackmore's interviewees' descriptions of the problems of "working inside a system not of your own making" reflect the kinds of situations that women can encounter: for example, within patriarchal cultures that construct them as good girls, when they do not challenge and resist masculinist discourse and practices, and as not being able to take a joke, when they expose sexist putdowns or abuse.

The strategy of managing others gently towards change is one that is perhaps well known to many feminist change agents. Here too, though, Blackmore points out some difficulties. A particularly significant silence can occur, for example, when gender equity workers engage with dominant discourses in ways that can leave "the problem of masculinity . . . unnamed, thus reconstituting femininity as the issue once again" (p. 125). A related problem is how "hard-core masculinities" can reconstitute themselves in superficially more acceptable forms, thus "co-opting, incorporating or subverting any counter-hegemonic impulses arising out

of feminist political agendas" (p. 129). I found Blackmore's discussion of this area both interesting and useful.

In Part 3 the focus is on "risky business". Blackmore's explorations of issues of emotionality and authority, sexuality and the body, and difference, turn the spotlight on to previously accepted invisibilities in the field of educational administration, providing much material for reflection. Each discussion is full of interesting and often vivid stories, which Blackmore uses to raise some difficult questions and important challenges. I need myself though, to "trouble" the distinctions being made between feminist and feminine leadership. While equating female leadership with feminist leadership does, as Blackmore points out, ignore political differences between women (p. 192), it seems to me that we need to think carefully about the possible effects of this development of theorising differences between female or feminine leadership and feminist leadership. There are risks here of reifying one way of practising leadership as feminist (and which kind of feminist?), and/or of valorising of feminist leadership as ethically and politically better than feminine leadership (that is, leadership practised by those women who do not identify primarily with feminist goals and values). If feminine and feminist are constructed as different in a binary contrast, this dichotomy could itself easily become rigid and exclusionary in ways that past distinctions between masculinity and femininity have.

As Blackmore points out, however, "Leadership, as an educative and participatory practice, in new hard times is difficult, dangerous and devalued" (p. 169). It remains particularly so for women. Although in Aotearoa/New Zealand we now have women holding the top six leadership positions in the state, and there are some women heads of big business corporations, the durability and malleability of misogynist ideas about the nature and place of women in a man's world is illustrated in a recent letter to the Editor of the Sunday Star Times. Under the heading of "Male PM?" a (male) correspondent wrote, "Isn't it time we had a man for a prime minister for a change, a leader of industry who is able to deal with problems with aplomb? Instead we have two ladies who can become emotionally upset, scratching and clawing each other rhetorically to no avail while the rest of the nation and the world look on in uneasy disquiet" (20 August, 2000, p. A8). When I read such statements, I can slip into a kind of despair that things will ever change. There is at times in Blackmore's text an echo of this kind of pessimism about "male resistance to gender equity" (p. 205). Many of us who are working in feminist analyses of pedagogy and leadership will probably agree with Blackmore's judgement that these are particularly hard times for feminist work in education (p. 205). Rather than breaking down, gendered divisions and hierarchies between managers, and workers, are being exacerbated within the new managerialism and top down forms of control. While Strachan's accounts of feminist principals' victories (however small) give us a reminder of the ever present potential for agency and help us "to glimpse what a different and effective form of educational leadership might look like" (1999, p. 135), Blackmore's analyses are timely warnings. Her research has shown how:

> feminist discourses of community, care and collegiality had traps for women leaders with the intensification of emotional management labour in self-managing schools . . . Equally important, the continued association of strong leadership with hard masculinity provides no alternative conceptualisation of masculinity for those men who seek leadership, but who, as many women do, reject the values of

> competitiveness, coercion and control and seek to reconceptualise leadership in more socially just and inclusive ways (pp. 208-9).

While *Troubling Women* is concerned largely with critique, throughout the book there are suggestions for ways that we can build on what we have learnt to develop further feminist interventions and challenges to exclusionary practices in the field of educational leadership. Read it to see if you agree with me that Blackmore's main point is that if it is to be useful, our theorising and practice needs to work at both individual and collective levels in ways that keep in view, and trouble the larger discursive contexts that are shaping our understandings, our work, our "selves".

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