

FEMINIST LEADERSHIP: LEADING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

JANE STRACHAN

*Department of Professional Studies
University of Waikato*

ABSTRACT *Are alternative forms of educational leadership possible and effective in a managerialist, neo-liberal education context? This article presents a case study of the feminist education leadership of one principal (Jill) whose social justice agenda was a driving force for her leadership practice. In particular, I describe two aspects of her leadership, support for "at risk" students and valuing multiculturalism. I suggest that not only is the practice of feminist leadership essential to achieve more equitable schools, it is also effective. In striving for social justice Jill looked for ways to share the power and responsibility and found it in the establishment of a co-principalship.*

INTRODUCTION

In an earlier edition of this journal (Strachan, 1995, p.160), I commented that:

It would appear that managerialism and the delivery of social justice are inequitable. Those who wish to practice alternative forms of leadership, including feminist leadership, may well find their leadership agenda compromised and their position untenable.

Certainly, the literature suggests that theoretically social justice and managerialism are antithetical (Codd, 1993). I decided to find out if in practice this was so and spent four years compiling the case studies of three feminist educational leaders. Why feminist leaders? Because the literature suggests that feminism in administration has social justice and equity as one of its major foci (Blackmore, 1993, 1996).

This article presents the case study of Jill who, at the time of this study in 1996, was the feminist principal of a multicultural, secondary school with a Socio Economic Status (SES) decile ranking of 2. It describes how she was able to work for social justice and equity in a neo-liberal education context.

I focus on only two aspects of Jill's social justice agenda: supporting 'at risk' students; and valuing multiculturalism. I suggest that the selection of staff who supported her social justice agenda and the establishment of a co-principalship, helped her to do this, and at the same time cope with the workload.

This was feminist research. It was carried out by a feminist (myself). Women's lives were central in the research process (Reinharz, 1992), and feminist theorising was used to explain and interpret the findings. Data were gathered using multiple interviews with each of the women, observing them as they went about their principalship, interviewing a selection of staff from each school, and collecting relevant documents, such as school newsletters.

JILL SULLIVAN: PRINCIPAL OF AOTEAROA COLLEGE

The student population of Aotearoa College was hugely diverse. In 1995 there were 43 different nationalities represented in the student population, speaking almost as many different languages. For 50% of the students English was not their first language. To broadly categorise the nationalities, 24% were Pakeha, 20% were Maaori, 30% were of Pacific Island origin and 26% were other nationalities of mainly Asian origin. Only ten years ago 75% of the student population was Pakeha. The huge influx of immigrants from the Pacific Islands and Asia dramatically affected the ethnic and socio-economic mix of the school. Many of the students were from families that were highly transient so their stay at Aotearoa College, in many cases, was less than one year.

The diverse nature of the student population, and the poverty experienced by many of the families, necessitated the setting up of a number of special purpose units. For example, because there were so many students who entered Aotearoa College with little or no English, there was an English immersion unit where students stayed, full-time or part-time, until their English was sufficiently fluent for them to cope in the normal classroom situation. There was also a unit for students with learning difficulties and a strongly developed system of pastoral care and guidance. A number of special staff appointments were made to meet the needs of 'at risk' students. For example, the school called on sexual abuse counsellors, a health worker who was a full staff member, and a social worker who worked full-time during the school term time.

Jill's Feminist Leadership

In referring to her leadership Jill commented that, "I'm interested in bringing about long-term change. I'm interested in shifting attitudes." She brought her own unique style of feminist leadership to work on social justice issues such as those associated with race, class, gender and poverty. However, she could not do it alone. To be able to tackle the social justice issues she needed a staff that also supported her ideals. When appointing new staff their views on, and commitment to, social justice were an important part of the appointment process. Intending staff were sent an information sheet which stated:

It is essential that all our staff members have a commitment to social justice, believing that schools like ours are not a second-rate alternative to select populations, but offer a wonderful chance to develop the knowledge of others and the interactive skills, that will equip young people to move easily in all aspects of our society, and in a diverse, international world...We seek teachers therefore, who have a warm and positive attitude toward other cultures (Aotearoa College, 1995).

Jill commented on the importance of this information as it helped to ensure that staff were aware of the ethos of the school and that she had a team working alongside her in the pursuit of her social justice goal. The Board of Trustees was also 'on board' with this commitment and gave Jill and her staff permission to publicly speak out on the issues that surround schools that have large populations

of students from low income families. The impact of the government's educational policy on widening the gap between rich and poor schools was something on which Jill frequently, and publicly, commented.

One day in mid 1996 I was sitting writing at my computer and at the same time listening to the National Programme on Radio New Zealand. The National government had just delivered their budget. Education was promised a further \$300,000,000. This prompted debate on a thorny issue that had received high media attention. It had been recently revealed that 80% of some secondary school intakes were functionally illiterate. These were usually schools that had low SES ratings and that had high percentages of Maaori and Pacific Island students (similar to Aotearoa College). At this time Jill had taken sabbatical leave to explore further her interest in 'at risk' students, and I found myself listening to a familiar voice. Jill was being interviewed on the National Programme. She spoke of the funding difficulties experienced by low SES schools and how they compounded the disadvantages already experienced by many of the students. I was to hear her a number of times over the next few days either on television or the radio championing the cause of providing better educational opportunities for the disadvantaged.

Because Aotearoa College was multi-ethnic and low SES there were many associated social justice issues that arose from those two factors. One issue was the large number of 'at risk' students.

'At risk' students

So concerned were Jill and her staff about the 'at risk' students at Aotearoa College that under Jill's leadership the school appointed a social worker to work with these young people. The skills of a local youth worker, visiting specialist counsellors, and two visiting medical practitioners, were also utilised. During the first two terms of her appointment, the social worker counselled one in ten students at Aotearoa College who had experienced serious personal difficulties. Funding for this type of initiative was not automatically available and had to either come out of the school's operations budget, or from contestable funding, or from outside agencies, or a combination of all of these. Raising money is very difficult for low SES schools (Thrupp, 1995). Aotearoa College was no exception.

Jill believed that unless the school dealt with these issues in young people's lives, then, learning would be very difficult. She put a great deal of her personal energy and time into providing support for 'at risk' students and ensuring that the experiences they had at Aotearoa College were warm and supportive. She wanted the school to model positive alternatives to what some students were experiencing in their personal lives.

Jill, as a member of the guidance committee, assisted in setting structures in place so that students 'at risk' could be identified, and intervention discussed and planned. She was also a member of the school's guidance and 'at risk' committees. She was also a member of two external committees that specifically focused on young people 'at risk'.

There were a number of other school structures designed to assist young people 'at risk' such as the peer support programme (senior students help junior students), and the Student Centre which assisted in keeping track of students'

attendance and helped students, who had poor organisational skills, to develop a work ethos. This centre also catered for disruptive students so teachers were able to get on with the business of teaching. Another unit worked with students who were chronic truants or school phobics and/or who were unhappy socially, and yet another with young people with learning difficulties.

However, Jill considered that the school working in isolation from the caregivers was pointless. She and her staff worked to involve students' families in decision-making and problem-solving. The school working in partnership with caregivers was a critical guiding philosophy. The Educational Review Office commented:

To this end [providing pastoral care for 'at risk' students] trustees and staff insist on the need for students and their families to form a partnership with the school and to understand that the educational progress of individuals is contingent upon the capacity of each of the parties to accept the responsibilities of the roles (Education Review Office, 1994, p. 3).

This partnership between the school and the student's family was particularly important in disciplinary hearings, which operated like family group conferences. These hearings were usually held where there was a violent or a drug related incident. Jill commented that the Board of Trustees hearings now dealt with very significant social issues. She attributed this to the greater social distress of families today:

My time at Aotearoa has coincided with a huge increase in social distress brought about through unemployment and other social factors and there is no way our school could operate even with the wonderful guidance network we have. That illustrates how things have changed and become so much more difficult.

The goal of the family group conference was to repair the damage done to the partnership between school, family and student that resulted in a suspension. Jill did not view a suspension as negative. Rather, she suggested that "...suspension is about drawing a line, about saying we cannot go on like this, enough is enough. I don't want to see a serious case land on us but a serious case will have a serious response." Where appropriate, the meetings were held on the marae.

Jill believed that the value of having the family involved was that they were the experts regarding their children, they knew their children best and so had a valuable contribution to make. Jill considered the opportunity to create such a partnership between the school and the families was a very positive aspect of the 1989 education reforms, "...it's [education] about quality being delivered in the schools and that quality can only be delivered if all three [school, student and family] were working in harmony."

Valuing multiculturalism

In deciding which social justice issues to prioritise, Jill consulted extensively with her staff. She found that one issue illuminated others and that in all the schools she had taught, issues of race and class were the most profound. Maaori and Pacific Island people were likely to be low income earners so the issues of race, class and poverty were linked. Therefore, it was these young people who were most likely to be 'at risk.' So, being principal of a multi-ethnic, low SES school Jill thought it important to work in ways that empowered the students and their families. Part of that empowerment process was a valuing of, and respect for, the different cultures represented at Aotearoa College.

When I asked Jill what those working with her would see as an important part of her leadership she commented:

The first thing that people would have noticed when I became principal was a very, very clear affirmation of things Maaori and multiculturalism as a really tangible part of my social justice agenda...I wanted everyone to feel good about being valued in the school and I wanted to symbolise it by the things around the school.

Tangata whenua have a special place in the culture of Aotearoa College. Framed copies of both the Maaori and English versions of the Treaty of Waitangi hang in the foyer. Staff commented on Jill's commitment to providing a school climate that fostered respect and tolerance for, and understanding of, other cultures, "[Jill is] fair she sticks up for minorities and their families..." Another staff member commented that Jill's open and affirming style with differing ethnic groups was a major aspect of her leadership. In November 1994, the Educational Review Office completed an assurance audit and commented on the school's commitment to New Zealand's dual cultural heritage:

The school encourages policies and practices which reflect New Zealand's dual cultural heritage and celebrate the unique qualities of Maaori culture, tikanga Maaori and te reo Maaori (Education Review Office, 1994, p. 7).

Jill was also an enthusiastic supporter of the Pacific Festival which was held each year. She gave tangible support by being a member of the school's Pacific Island committee. Many different cultural groups and clubs within the school perform their traditional dances and songs and traditional foods are served. These, among others, were tangible and visible acknowledgments of the culturally diverse nature of the school population.

Sharing the power and sharing the responsibility

Given that Jill was very committed to social justice and equity, how was she able to do this? Particularly, how was she able to do this in a managerialist, education climate which has made it increasingly difficult for principals to remain educationally focused (Wylie, 1997)? Through her redistribution of power:

As far as I'm concerned power is like the socket in the wall. You plug it in to do the job that must be done....Power is necessary to get the work done, but power is a garment that you put on when it is time to take on the role. You hand it over when it's time. (Jill)

In 1996 there were only a few schools that had implemented a system of co-principalship in New Zealand; one was Aotearoa College. As the sole principal, Jill found the volume of work and the enormous responsibility of running a school overwhelming, "[the job is] too big for one person...the reforms have put on a huge workload and taken away nothing...especially in low SES schools." She searched for an alternative model of leadership that would share the load and the responsibility yet be in accordance with her idea of flattened, open leadership. The answer came in the setting up of a co-principalship. Jill and the new co-principal shared a warm, collegial relationship with the same vision of education and a joint commitment to social justice. Both talked of the balance of skills between them as co-principals. One male staff member commented that he doubted if a man would have initiated the idea of a co-principalship as men would not be so willing to share power, "It was a very feminist thing to do." This view was shared by Jill. She commented on the setting up of the co-principalship:

I'm a high capacity person, I work as hard as I can. I have no other commitments but I cannot keep up. By giving away some power and becoming a co-principal, the school and the cause [social justice] will be better served. Now that, to my mind, is classic feminism. (Jill)

Staff viewed the co-principalship positively, and acknowledged the complementary skills brought to the co-principalship. This meant that Jill was able to devote herself more to those parts of the principalship that she felt passionate about, for example social justice. A staff member commented, "[The] co-principalship has made a difference, it's now better, Jill's less stressed and burdened."

The co-principalship enabled her to cope with the overwhelming workload. She did not see herself as a well organised person and commented to me on more than one occasion that she would like to be better organised, "my desk is just a flaming disgrace...I cannot keep up." The co-principalship enabled her to continue to prioritise student needs and at the same time cope with the administria.

THE COSTS

Some staff expressed a concern that Aotearoa College was seen by the school community as a school for 'at risk' students and therefore not a good school for the more academically able student. The dilemma for Jill was that her commitment to providing support for the 'at risk' student, so they could get on with learning, might deter some families from choosing Aotearoa College for their children. Staff were not suggesting that the 'at risk' student not be supported. All staff interviewed believed this to be important. Rather, they were commenting on the

perception of Aotearoa College that might be generated for some caregivers as a result of the 'at risk' image.

This is problematic. Research shows that low SES schools, such as Aotearoa College, are most vulnerable to middle-class flight (Thrupp, 1995). When student numbers fall it becomes increasingly difficult to offer a broad range of curricula, particularly at senior level. The result can be a further decline in student numbers and, eventually, a reduction in staff.

Low SES schools have the added difficulty of persuading parents that just because they have a high proportion of students from low income families, with the associated social difficulties, does not mean that they are providing education of a lesser quality. Given that schools with a low SES rating and a high cultural mix are the ones most likely to fail (Lauder et al., 1994; Thrupp, 1995, 1996), then this was a pretty gloomy scenario for Aotearoa College. However, Aotearoa College was not in a "spiral of decline" (Lauder et al., 1994, p. 58) as the Educational Review Office report attested. This suggests that there was some other factor that was contributing to its 'success'.

CONCLUSION

This study has raised the possibility of co-principalship as an effective leadership alternative. Like feminist leadership, as a model of principalship, co-principalship is still a fringe alternative. It is not widely known how co-principalships operate and how successful they are. Research needs to explore this. It could be that there are real strengths in such a model of leadership. It may offer a viable, effective and exciting leadership alternative that is suited to the education climate of today and is particularly effective for schools such as Aotearoa College where a social justice agenda is of such importance.

EPILOGUE

I sent Jill a copy of this article for her to review and comment on. It was over a year since she had been involved in the research and I wanted her to read it before I submitted it for publication. She faxed me back with this comment:

I am keeping a lower public profile on "at risk" issues to protect our school's enrolment numbers, a sad commentary on the marketisation of education.

It would appear that Jill has had to engage in what Harold (1995) refers to as pragmatic leadership. The cost of her idealism was too high in terms of student enrolment numbers and therefore jobs. The price is silence. Indeed a sad commentary.

REFERENCES

Aotearoa College. (1995). *Information sheet - teachers* [Brochure]. Auckland: Aotearoa College.

- Blackmore, Jill. (1996). 'Breaking the silence': Feminist contributions to educational administration and policy. In Keith Leithwood (Ed.), *International handbook in educational administration and leadership*. The Netherlands: Kluwer Press.
- Blackmore, Jill. (1993a). *Leadership in crisis or 'a taste for the feminine': Feminist insights into educational change*. Geelong: Deakin University, Victoria, Australia.
- Codd, John. (1993). Managerialism, market liberalism and the move to self-managing schools in New Zealand. In John Smyth (Ed.), *A socially critical view of the self-managing school* (pp. 153-170). London: The Falmer Press.
- Education Review Office. (1994). *Assurance audit report: Aotearoa College*. Auckland: Education Review Office.
- Harold, Barbara. (1995). *Negotiation and contestation during times of change: The introduction of new educational policies to three rural schools*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Hamilton, New Zealand: University of Waikato.
- Lauder, Hugh., Hughes, David., Waslander, Sietske., Thrupp, Martin., McGlenn, Jim., Newton, Sue., & Dupuis, Ann. (1994). *The creation of market competition for education in New Zealand*. The Smithfield Project. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Reinharz, Shulamit. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Strachan, Jane. (1995). *Making a difference: Changing the gender balance in educational leadership*. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 1, 151-162.
- Strachan, Jane. (in press). Feminist educational leadership in a New Zealand neo-liberal context. *Journal of Educational Administration*.
- Thrupp, Martin. (1995). Poor performers or just plain poor? Assumptions in the neo-liberal account of school failure. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 1, 45-60.
- Thrupp, Martin. (1996). *The school mix effect*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington.
- Wylie, Cathy. (1997). *Self-managing schools seven years on*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.