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SHARING LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS

NARRATIVES OF DISCOURSE AND POWER

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the phenomenon of shared leadership as it emerged in three primary schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand, during the 1990s restructuring of educational administration. At this time, two 'mainstream' discourses of professional collaborative leadership and neo-liberal managerialism came into 'collision.' The principal's role was re-constituted from being a collaborative instructional leader, to being a chief executive, entrepreneurial manager. Separate contracts for principals and senior school managers detailed managerial tasks, performance standards and accountability lines that heightened the existing divisions between them and other teachers. The possibility of developing 'flattened,' more democratic forms of shared decision making and leadership seemed increasingly remote. Yet it was in this context that a small number of co-principalships were initiated around the country.

The study employs narrative, Foucauldian and feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis tools to examine how opportunities for change opened up within 'cracks' and contradictions in the 1990s discursive terrain of educational leadership. Moving between micro and macro analyses, the thesis demonstrates how individual and collective agency is enacted within and against dominant discourses, effecting transformations of practice. Three groups of women challenged and/or co-opted elements of managerial, professional and feminist discourses of organisation as they developed their co-principalships. These initiatives opened up for many people different ways of thinking about and practising school leadership: as one child said about her school, "Here there is no boss." Three case narratives provide insights into strategies for developing more fully democratic partnerships between principals and staff, principals and board members, professionals and parents. Open, honest communication and mutual forms of accountability that go beyond current requirements for contractual, task specific and linear forms of control, are particularly significant for a successful co-principalship.

Governmental forms of power, material inequalities and socio-cultural hegemonies of gender, class and ethnicity, can constrain the democratic potential of shared leaderships however. Related factors that led to the disestablishment of two of the co-principalships included inequalities of knowledge and experience, difficulties over funding and staffing, and struggles between a governing body and their co-principals over the meanings and practices of governance and management.

There are flaws in arguments that posit a generic model of 'strong' management that can be imposed across all schools, with assumed uniform results. This study shows how people's beliefs about and practices of school leadership are constituted in relation to their own backgrounds, interactions with other people in their local school community and wider socio-political, economic and discursive struggles over power.

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PREFACE

This thesis is a study of shared leaderships in schools. It tells the stories of three primary school co-principalships that were initiated by women teachers in Aotearoa/New Zealand between 1993/5. Three case study narratives, developed from the accounts of the protagonists, their supporters and those who opposed their attempts to change the ways their schools were led and managed, describe the co-principalships' development over periods of between three and five years. In the study, I read the participants' stories and viewpoints within and against other texts, such as school records, my field notes of observations in the schools, policy documents and educational administration academic literature, in a discourse analysis that aims to work at both micro and a macro levels. This is in the sense of, on the one hand, identifying and describing a discursive context in which the co-principalship practices of shared leadership emerged, and on the other, documenting and analysing how individuals negotiated a set of often conflicting discourses that can be seen to be both enabling and constraining their initiatives. In these ways, the study aims to explore the interactions and processes involved in the constituting of a new subject position for school leadership in this country - that of a co-principal - and of new ways of sharing school leadership.[1]

While my analysis is developed around an exploration of the intersections and contradictions between professional collaborative, market managerial and feminist conceptions and practices of school leadership, two main strands of interest have underpinned the study. Firstly, it explores the idea of sharing leadership as a way of challenging the taken for granted 'normality' of hierarchical single line structures of management, accountability and control in schools. Secondly, it explores the influence of gender and feminist discourses on women's initiations of different leadership structures and ways of working within an educational system where most schools continue to be led by men, and within an increasingly dominant managerialist discourse that is hierarchical and as some feminist analysis has argued, masculinist, in its rationale and practice. The research study of three New Zealand primary school examples of shared leadership was conceived within a Foucauldian (1980) approach to discourse analysis informed by a feminist concern to identify and discuss the impact of socio-cultural hegemonies on opportunities for developing alternative school leadership philosophies and practices.

The study is presented in this thesis in three main sections. Part I uses a personal storytelling approach to explain the background to the study and to discuss the literatures about co-principalship and shared teacher leaderships, and feminist studies of women in educational

[1] In my analyses in Part III, I use different aspects of the narratives for illuminating different theoretical arguments, rather than just developing inter-case comparisons.

administration. I discuss the work of Foucault, feminist poststructuralists and narrative researchers whose approaches have informed my research rationales and methods, shaping my questions and interpretations of the research material I generated and/or gathered during five years of fieldwork.

Part II begins with my analysis of the educational leadership discursive context in which co-principalships emerged in Aotearoa/New Zealand. These two chapters are followed by the three co-principalship case narratives, which are the heart of the thesis. These narratives describe the schools and their communities and represent the participants' stories, experiences and accounts of their shared leadership initiatives. While there seems to be little obvious analysis from me in these three chapters, they are research narrative inquiries, in the sense that "narrative is both phenomenon and method" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p.416). Although my voice is not overtly present, it is my research concerns that have shaped the stories I have been told and the investigations and observations I have carried out in the schools. The narratives have been constructed to illuminate the central problematic of this study: why and how did the three primary school co-principalships emerge as they did, going against the grain of 'commonsense' understandings of leadership and dominant theories and regulations for 'efficient' school management. They explain also what happened to each of the initiatives and provide insights into factors that may contribute to the successful establishment of alternative structures and practices of leadership and organisation in primary schools.

Part III draws together the threads of argument developed throughout Parts I and II. Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 extend the largely implicit interpretations embedded in the co-principalship narratives into analyses of theoretical questions that increasingly interested me during the course of the study. These chapters draw on different parts of the case narratives to explore some aspects of the sociological structure/agency debate and seek new insights into how individuals live their lives and take action within a range of competing and often contradictory discourses. Using a combination of Gramscian, Foucauldian and feminist poststructuralist theoretical tools, I show how discourses can be both constitutive of and constituted by individual subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, and how wider socio-cultural hegemonies (organised in particular around gender, ethnicity and class) can cut across these discursive dynamics, shaping individual and group practices in historically specific times and institutional sites. Within an analysis of current forms of governmentality as both centralising and individualising forms of power (Foucault, 1982; 1991), I show how varying recognitions of dominant discourses, and different practices of accommodation, resistance and/or co-option, have been contributing to the constituting co-principalship as a counter discourse of school leadership in this country. Some implications for policy and/or practice are highlighted in the conclusion.