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Advancing Women In Leadership

**WOMEN AS LEADERS:
PIECING TOGETHER THEIR REFLECTIONS
ON LIFE AND THE PRINCIPALSHIP**

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The artists of quilting have used form, materials, and practices quite different from those that, until recently have been identified with "art" You are clearly in the presence of artists of high technical excellence and design quality who were not treated or recognized as artists until the women's movement. A quilt was made to be used. It was integrated into particularistic relations - the piece of her grandmother's dress, her daughter's pinafore - and was sometimes made by a group of women working together. The making itself and the friendships were built into the design, the collection of fabrics, the stitching (Smith, 1987, p. 23)

Just as the women who, for generations, worked alone and together to piece together the scraps and remains of former clothing to provide warm coverings for their family members, were not acknowledged as legitimate artists until the women's movement, women leaders have not, until more recently, been acknowledged as legitimate leaders in organizations. Some writers have noted that there is a new paradigm of leadership developing in contemporary organizations, due partly to the strengths that women

are realizing they bring to the workplace. The paradigm has been there for some time, but there is now enough of a critical mass of women in formal organizations and unique entrepreneurial efforts that the effects of that paradigm are being felt (Bancroft, 1995; Lee, 1994). Called "the subtle revolution," the increase in numbers of executive and management women has changed, and will continue to change, the attitudes and actions of organizations (Helgesen, 1990; Leavitt, 1988; Towery, 1998). This need reinforces Harding's (1987) position that, until the less powerful raise their voices to articulate their experiences, all leaders and their organizations will not benefit or gain perspective from those experiences. Undoubtedly, attention must be paid to the need for leadership theory that acknowledges and incorporates women's experiences and perspectives (Helgesen, 1990; Regan & Brooks, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1989; Waggoner, 1998).

Feminist researchers in educational administration and other professions have yearned to contribute women's voices to the field of study that informs leadership practice and preparation programs in the field. The appearance of women in studies of educational leadership is relatively recent (Ah-Nee Benham & Cooper, 1998; Fennell, 1994; Brown & Irby, 1998; Waggoner, 1998) and is beginning to counteract the long-held view of K-12 administration as a male activity (Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995; Regan & Brooks, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1989). Admittedly, my research study of four exemplary women elementary principals contributes a miniscule amount to the literature of educational leadership with its examination of the relationship between women's life experiences and their leadership values and beliefs. Nevertheless, its findings have struck a familiar, yet emotional, chord for women already serving as educational leaders in schools, districts, and universities.

An extensive review of the literature on leadership, women as leaders and learners, educational administration, and the psycho-social development of women provided the basis for what I identified as the feminist attributes of leadership. The women in the study consistently exhibited these attributes throughout their life lines, responses to interview questions, stories and examples from their leadership practice, leadership artifacts, sketches of their schools as organizations, journals, and metaphors about life and the principalship:

- A strong caring ethic with value placed on inclusion and connection.
- A view of the leader's work as cyclical and unending, accomplished through relationships and connections.
- Preference for competence and trustworthiness over loyalty when hiring.
- Leadership by giving voice to vision and using that voice to empower others to work toward common goals.
- Integration of personal and professional aspects of life.
- View of the organization as nonhierarchical with the leader in the center.
- Communication as key to organizational success, with emphasis on the importance of conflict resolution.
- View of power - the ability to get the job done - as not finite, but expanded when shared through collaborative and participatory styles of leadership.
- Ongoing learning from a variety of sources; view of leaders as learners.

These four women, ranging in age from 48 to 56, had secured their first principalship after the age of thirty-five. None had aspired to an administrative role, mostly due to the lack of meaningful role models and their desire to continually fine tune their teaching practice and serve as teacher leaders within their schools and districts. One had earned a graduate degree in educational leadership after starting with counseling course work, whereas the other three had degrees in curriculum and instruction, reading, and child development. Interestingly enough, the nudging forces behind each of these women to consider the principalship when opportunities emerged were male university researchers/professors and a superintendent, who, in the women's words, exhibited the above feminist attributes of leadership.

These women spoke about their life experiences, both professionally and personally, and constructed meaning for themselves, and for me, about the connections between their life experiences and the women's thinking about school leadership. Like the quiltmaker, each woman used fabric pieces, some leftover scraps and some new fabric, that were available to stitch together the practical and meaningful "quilt of life" that was uniquely her own. Carolyn used a similar metaphor, "making sense of my life and work has been a quilt in the making - each square from life's carpetbag, representing success or challenge, pieced together in a beautiful pattern of memories" (Carolyn, p. 96). Brief summaries of their portraits follow.

Although she had retired near the end of my study, Jean had been a principal in a fairly large suburban district, serving as the leader of a K-5 school with 200 children from both financially privileged and disadvantaged families. I gave her the title of "The Cultural, Connecting Leader" to symbolize her style of leadership, commitment to diversity and cross-cultural education, and her passion for a healthy school culture. She had been an only child, was educated in a Quaker high school, served as a music teacher, dealt with alcoholism in her family, and had traveled extensively.

Carolyn, "The Trusted, Family-Focused Leader", served as the principal of an early childhood center with nearly 400 kindergartners and first graders from a variety of backgrounds in a medium-sized suburban district. She regarded her work as a trusted coach and advisor for young parents as the cornerstone of her role as a school leader. Also an only child and accomplished musician, she had found solace in school from her troubled home environment, married at a young age and reared four children while her alcoholic spouse squandered their resources and reputation. She taught in elementary classrooms and served as a reading specialist prior to her principalship.

As "The Servant Leader", Mary was the principal of a Pre-K-5 Christian school, located in an urban setting, with an enrollment of 350 students. She clearly saw her role as serving and supporting the teaching and learning experiences in the school. One of four daughters, her father had played a positive and significant role in her early years, especially in his encouragement of her Peace Corps and mission work. She married and reared three daughters while teaching a variety of elementary grades.

Last, Patricia, "The Leader of the School Family of Learners", served as principal in the largest elementary school in the study, which had an enrollment of more than 400 students from all socioeconomic levels. She placed a significant priority on learning for everyone in the school and held dear the requirements of special-needs learners and at-risk children. She grew up with an older brother, married young and reared four sons, and taught most of the elementary grades.

These women's personal lives revealed the pieces of life's quilt that they had sought or earned as well as those pieces that were rudely provided, left over, or left out: promising educational experiences, advanced degrees, professional work, friendships and relationships, as well as the impact of alcoholism, loss of babies before birth and within the first year of life, divorce, and betrayal of spouses and administrative colleagues. The commonalities in their professional career choices accentuate the limitations that existed for them as bright young women 25 to 30 years ago. Yet, consistent with the findings of Mitchell and Helson's (1990) work with women in midlife, these women elementary principals exhibited commitments to people, their careers, and their school communities.

Moreover, their stories and experiences exhibited the feminist attributes of leadership. They cared deeply about the quality of education provided in their schools and about the people who worked together, through a variety of relationships, connections and shared power, to provide that education. Jean summed it up by stating, "I did the role of the principalship very differently and did not do it with a conviction that it was right as much as it was just the only way I knew how to do it. If I could start it over again, I would

make these connections with conviction! (Jean, p. 96).

It seemed difficult for them to take credit for, or even acknowledge, change initiatives in their schools, because these efforts, in their minds, never really ended, simply built foundations for next steps. Mary voiced that hesitation, "... I never feel entirely certain ... That is a scary thing to think that people have that much respect for the things I say and think, because to me, they are not set in concrete ..." (Mary, p. 39). They gave voice to their vision through written communication, reminders, feedback, study groups, and frequent individual and group conversations. Although they did not actively seek conflict, they accepted it as a necessary component of healthy relationships and quality work. Both Jean and Mary used the phrases of "having my antennae out all of the time" and "synchronicity ... if I am listening" (Jean, p. 97; Mary, p.54 & 82).

Above all, each of these women were committed learners who learned from their own reflections as well as many other sources, "I learned to be a leader as I learned to live and become a person" (Mary, p. 79). For them, on-going learning was the energy source that fueled their leadership practice. In Jean's words, "making sense of my life and work has been an endless journey through my own journals, literature, biographies, meditation, and even this dissertation research" (Jean, p. 73).

One strong commonality that emerged in both the women's conversations and their artifacts was the nonhierarchical way in which they viewed their schools as organizations and where they viewed themselves in the organizational structure. Each saw themselves as leaders in a central location within a sketch of a rounded figure showing connections between and among stakeholders working together on behalf of the children in the school. The figures showed a central catalyst with many avenues of multi-way communication and a sense of fluidity.

Jean's sketch of her school as a wheel emphasized that the attachment of her school to central office administration and the board of education provided both support and limitations as she attempted to maneuver the school down the bumpy road of life dealing with parents and students in her school. She said, "I never felt secure that I could go very far afield... and get support from central administration. I had to keep listening and learning and keep that balance so that the wheel wouldn't collapse" (Jean, p. 42).

Describing the relationships as protons and neutrons in the nucleus, Carolyn's nested identically- sized circles, drawn with dotted lines interfacing with each other, showed how each person's role was equally important and always evolving in the education and support of young learners. She further explained, "In order for all of us to feel as though we are in this together, we all have to value the jobs that everyone does and support one another in that respect" (Carolyn, p. 73) "I don't want to be here in the center by myself" (Carolyn, p. 62).

Patricia drew a simple design depicting the school as a family with the students at the center with her near them working with interconnecting oval-shaped groups of staff, parents and community. She said that each oval showed that no one's work was bigger or more important than another's, "good communication and acceptance going from teachers to kids and from kid to kid" (Patricia, p. 54).

At the end of the study, all three women agreed that Mary had drawn the sketch that most accurately represented the reality of the principalship, "a jellyfish with its feelers out" (Mary, p. 59). Looking like neurons and synapses in the brain or some kind of electronic or transportation network, the principal appeared hooked, in a fluid and moving manner, to web-like structures with every group and individual who worked in the school. In her words, "I am the center of the web and things are going on from me. Increasingly, I see one of the centers of the webs, but there are other centers where things are going on that I maybe set the atmosphere to make it possible, but I don't continue to control it" (Mary, p. 58).

The women's metaphors about their lives and work as school leaders captured the feminist attributes of leadership from the literature as well as their own unique personalities, values and beliefs. Both Jean and Carolyn used the metaphor of a symphony to describe their work as principals:

A symphony with parts for many different instruments, themes and variations, fast and slow parts, harmony and dissonance, the hope of introduction, the complexity of development and the joy of occasional resolutions. The symphony was a work of art in which I had some artistic license and yet I was also bound by many musical laws and traditions. The symphony, my life as an elementary principal, could be said to be a successful composition and performance although it fell apart in some places. Certainly the themes were clear but the tension in some places was more than the audience or I could bear. The test of time will tell where the themes have touched the lives of children who will have a chance to perform in the future. (Jean, p. 73)

My practice as an elementary principal has been a symphony orchestra practicing for opening night. There are sectional rehearsals, sight-reading challenges, opening night jitters, late night practices . . . all leading to a successful finale and a standing ovation! (Carolyn, p. 95)

Mary's metaphor of an ophthalmologist's office experience described her vision and yearning for change in the school whereas Patricia's metaphor captured the combination of unpredictability and patterns in the principalship:

A machine in front of me changes lens as the doctor asks if it is clear, is it better, how about this? I reply that it is fuzzy, better, can't see anything now. At times, I see things very clearly, then new set of lenses makes things look askew. Some astigmatism makes certain parts of the picture distorted while others remain clear. I think that the vision continues to grow clearer and broader and richer, overall, in life and work. But it does take into account the continual adjustment needed and the times when the vision is out of focus and unclear. (Mary, p. 94)

My practice as an elementary principal is like a roller coaster ride with its many ups and downs, leaving me feeling off balance, ready to scream, thrilled and ending on a level track before beginning all over again. (Patricia, p. 132)

In her landmark research about women in educational administration, Shakeshaft (1989) made the point that it is not so much the questions that our individual research studies answer, but the additional questions they raise that contribute to the literature and future inquiry. An unexpected piece in this study emerged which prompts further inquiry into what I later called the emotional side of school leadership.

Although a major lesson from their life experiences was an increase in their acceptance of process and how long things take, the most staggering and unexpected theme in their stories of life and leadership beliefs and values was the impact of loss. Two of the women had lost babies through miscarriage and death. One could not remember her childhood and acutely felt the loss of those years and experiences as she worked to shape her children's lives at home and school. Two of the women had recently experienced loss of parents: the death of both parents and the loss that accompanied a step-father's early stages of Alzheimer's disease. Personal and emotional loss surfaced in their stories of absent fathers, alcoholic

family members, unfaithful husbands who were unethical and law breaking, and divorce after long years of separation and single parenthood. Losses existed on the professional front as well: a mentoring superintendent who left the district as soon as the woman assumed the principalship, the increasing levels of physical tiredness as the number of evening commitments increased, the heartache when tragedy happened to school children and their families, the broken relationships that occurred in times of conflict and reassignment of roles, grief for the toll their work had on their own families, and the realization that not all administrators shared their passion and commitment for leadership in the district. Perhaps another researcher could further explore the role of loss in women's lives and leadership values and beliefs.

In this study, I attempted to "put women's faces" on the literature of school leadership through an examination of the relationship between women's life experiences and their values and beliefs as educational leaders. Carolyn's comment confirms that attempt, "... you have captured my soul" (Carolyn, p. 112). As I moved into the conversations with each of the women, I was haunted by the distant voices of feminist researchers who had wondered whether the feminist research process of women interviewing women might be a contradiction in terms and that the meandering journey of the research path might be too unpredictable (Oakley, 1981; Wagner-Martin, 1995). As each woman reflected on the parts of her self and her work of which she was most proud, angry, frustrated, and accepting, I felt the strength of her pride, the intensity of her anger, the seriousness of her frustration, and her eventual acceptance. As I reflected on the study's findings, I was, most of all, saddened by the women's collective sense of loss as they admitted that their administrative colleagues, both principals and central office, often did not share their passion for leading change in the district:

I was angry that so many of the administrators in my district were relatively uneducated, narrow minded and anti-intellectual. Their intelligence, dedication and goodness is unquestionable but it was frustrating and boring to work with them (Jean, p. 74).

It seemed as though, in their own individual quilts of life, these women had delicately handled the needle to add these emotional pieces to the design of their work. Yet, to omit them because the pain or regret would have been too great or uncomfortable would indeed, have been inauthentic - something none of them would have found acceptable. Therefore, the concept of piece-making took on further meaning when I realized that it meant not only the parts of life that women purposefully seek, but also the parts of life that are handed to them, and then the emotionality of it all as they muster the cognitive and creative energy to make the pieces fit together in some kind of useful pattern or design. Perhaps the emotions of leadership are the threads that hold the pieces in place to create a lasting design that is simultaneously and wonderfully aesthetic, but also pragmatically functional, as in women's quilts of long ago.

Feminist stress on women's socially constructed "difference" from men can go along with recognition of diversity among women themselves, if we acknowledge that multifaceted entity - the patchwork quilt, so to speak - that is the group called women (Cott, 1986, p. 60).

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