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Women's leadership development is everybody's business: if not now, when?

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper lies in our special interest in women leaders and those aspiring to leadership positions in schools and other educational contexts within Australia. Leadership is a gendered concept, and due to a myriad of factors including conscious and unconscious bias, and the challenges of balancing career with other life commitment, the reality is that women's career journeys are different from men's. Women's unique career trajectories have implications for achieving their leadership potential. In addition to reviewing some of the extant literature in the area of women in educational leadership, we share our experiences and reflections based on our research and the leadership development programmes we have run for women mainly in Australia. These programmes have reinforced to us their value, place, and contribution to enhancing women's capacities for leadership. In this paper, we address the following four key questions as they pertain to women leaders within the Australian context: (1) Why a focus on gender and leadership? (2) What are some of the barriers impeding women leaders? (3) Why is it important to have multiple faces of leadership? (4) Why is women's leadership development everyone's responsibility?

KEYWORDS

Women; leadership development; schools; barriers; Australia

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, both of us have been involved in research and work with leaders in schools, the public sector, universities, and other organisations where we have designed and delivered tailor-made leadership programmes and some of these have been exclusively for women. The focus of this paper lies in our special interest in women leaders and those aspiring to leadership positions in schools and other educational contexts in Australia. Leadership is a gendered concept, and due to a myriad of factors including both conscious and

unconscious bias, and the challenges of balancing career with other life commitments, some women are prevented from achieving their leadership potential.

In addition to reviewing some of the extant literature in the area of women in educational leadership, we share our experiences and reflections based on our research and the leadership development programmes we have run for women. These programmes have reinforced to us their value, place, and contribution not only for providing a nuanced approach to leadership development and enhancing women's capacities, but also in building and ensuring a cadre of women and men who will be inspired to work with and support other women. Between 2017 and 2019, we joined forces in the development of a women in school leadership (WISL) programme which we ran on behalf of a professional learning institute in Australia. Over a period of three years, we worked with three cohorts of women aspiring and new leaders. The focus of the WISL was providing women with opportunities to engage in developing their leadership capabilities, reflect on and leverage their strengths, determine opportunities for growth, and build upon their personal and professional skills. It also enabled the participants to share their doubts, challenges, self-imposed limitations, vulnerabilities, and ambitions with others in the programme in a psychologically safe space to do so.

Some shapers of our world views

Both of us have undertaken formal study and research on women in educational leadership that has shaped our views and strengthened our resolve to support women in the work we do. In 1991, as part of a Master of Educational Administration degree, Lisa C. Ehrich wrote a dissertation that explored the role of mentorship as a policy mechanism to support women interested in achieving the principalship and senior positions beyond the principalship in Queensland government schools in Australia. Since that time, she has undertaken research that has focused on the centrality of mentoring for women in universities (Ehrich 2022) organisations (Ehrich and Kimber 2016), and schools (Ehrich 1995).

In 2006, Barb Watterston's Doctoral thesis explored ways to create an inclusive learning environment, where tightly modelled perspectives of what constitutes appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour open up and no longer restrict students' learning, participation and potential. Interrogation of these complex questions was explored where the voices of primary school students contributed to informing recommendations and implications for policy and practice. At the same time, she explored this focus on gender as a general manager of a leadership centre where she looked at the statistics of women in leadership roles challenging the 'one size fits all' approach to leadership development programmes, and a more personalised approach to professional learning.

A chance meeting with Jane Kise (author, consultant, and academic) at a women in leadership conference in 2018 led Watterston to collaborate on a book for and about women leaders and those aspiring to school leadership

to let them know they are not alone, that gender barriers do indeed exist, and that the world needs more women influencing policy and practice. Their book entitled *Step In, Step Up* was published. In writing the book, Kise and Watterston (2019) were not arguing that men cannot or do not experience gender-based barriers to achieving leadership or barriers while working as leaders. On the contrary, gender stereotypes limit all genders. Of interest, though, was a consideration of the differences between men and women in the experience of their leadership journeys, and their particular desire to empower women to step up to leadership roles in schools and beyond. The mission of WomenEd (2023, https://womened.com/home) encapsulates the type of work Watterston has sought to achieve: to empower 'more women in education to have the choice to progress on their leadership journey.'

In this paper, we focus on four key questions pertaining to women in school leadership that continue to create a type of restlessness in us since they still need to be asked in 2023. All four questions have helped us to crystalise our way of working with women educators:

1. Why a focus on gender and leadership?
2. What are some of the barriers impeding women leaders?
3. Why is it important to have multiple faces of leadership?
4. Why is women's leadership development everyone's responsibility?

In the discussion that follows, we consider each of these questions as they pertain mainly to women educational leaders within the Australian context.

Why a focus on gender and leadership?

Leadership has been identified as a critical factor for organisational effectiveness. It has been described in many different ways and there are thousands of theories ready to explain it. The following assumptions are ones that have formed the basis of our thinking about leadership and ones that we share with participants in our leadership programmes:

- leadership needs to be understood within its wider context;
- leadership is mosaic and organic;
- leadership is relational and relies on trusting, supportive and collaborative relationships with others;
- empowerment is a positive and enabling way of utilising power; and
- learning with and from each other builds capacity.

Effective leaders, irrespective of gender, 'react and respond with strategies and principles appropriate to the context in light of the shifting power dynamics within their specific organization' (Bierema 2016, 132). Power, then, is a central

concept of leadership and power can be used to empower (power to or with) or disempower. 'Power with' models are 'inherently relational in context' (Blase and Anderson 1995, 14) and challenge traditional hierarchical views of power that see power as exclusively, 'power over.' The 'power to' or 'power with' view of power is one that we advocate since it has its foundations in feminist scholarship (Fennell 1999; Gilligan 1982).

Mary Beard (2017) describes the problematic big picture of why women struggle to lead. She says, 'if women are not perceived to be fully within the structures of power, surely it is power that we need to redefine rather than women?' (Beard 2017, 83). In writing their book, Kise and Watterston (2019) saw the struggles in definitions of power that were constricting rather than energising women in pursuit of leadership opportunities. Their book reframes power so that it moves away from a top-down view of power towards the collaborative power of relationships. A relational view of power and leadership is akin to the notion of 'collaborative professionalism' (Campbell 2018; Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018) since it underscores a particular type of collaboration between professionals characterised by trust, respect, and mutually supportive relationships.

Traditional theories of leadership that emerged in the early part of the twentieth century focused on 'great men' (Northouse 2022) and the term, 'leader' was associated with 'male' traits. Historically, it is men who have exercised leadership and been recognised as leaders, while women leaders have been afforded little place with few exceptions (Klenke 1996, 27). Bierema (2016) refers to 'normative gatekeeping' where the male model of leadership has been normalised and becomes the acceptable standard for leadership practices.

It could be argued that even though the last 20 years or more have seen an increase in the number of women politicians, school leaders, vice-chancellors, and senior corporate leaders in Australia and elsewhere, there is still a tendency to view leadership synonymously with men rather than women due to 'deep-rooted beliefs in our society that continue to support male dominance' (Coleman 1993, 36). As Sinclair (2013, 242) argues, 'women's identities, gender and bodies are routinely tied together and attributed meanings antithetical to leadership.'

Given this prevailing view, it becomes incredibly important to put the spotlight on women leaders since the assumptions about the equation of males to leadership continue to influence how women leader see themselves and are viewed by others. Being considered not leadership worthy or being relegated to particular activities befitting a typical feminine role is an example of gender stereotyping which is one of the barriers that women face in their work. We consider this barrier among others later in the paper.

Every culture defines gender and gender roles of women and men (Tuttle 1987). Just as leadership is socially constructed, so too is gender. Gender is a sociological concept that refers to the social meaning of what it means to be

male or female or 'masculine' or 'feminine' (Tuttle 1987). Every society has its own 'archetypes,' those universal models of femininity and masculinity that influence human behaviour and can in themselves be limiting in stereotyping people (Kise and Watterston 2019). An important part of the content of the programmes we have run for women leaders has been a consideration of some of the archetypal feminine perspectives/values and those masculine perspectives/values that have dominated much thinking about leadership.

An exercise Watterston has carried out in many of her women in leadership programmes is for participants to reflect on both archetypes and see the advantages each brings but also the difficulties that may emerge if one set of values dominates the other or is over-used. It's not a matter of either or but finding the balance between the two sets of values.

Davies (1993) argues that strategies are required to break away from stereotypical male-female dualisms which restrict and constrain exploration and potential in tightly defined notions of what it means to be male and female. Noteworthy is that in recent times, there has been writing and research to suggest that femininity and feminine values of empathy, trustworthiness, and patience are a way of ensuring twenty-first century prosperity (Gerzema and D'Antonio 2013). For too long we have devalued the feminine; the skills considered soft when in actual fact they are essential. The traits and skills required for successful and effective leadership in this century are more traditionally aligned to the feminine – communication, collaboration, empathy, adaptability, flexibility, social influence, emotional intelligence (OECD 2018). Arabella Douglas, a traditional Aboriginal Minyungbal woman, reminds us that it is time to 'act in sync with the world, in partnership, more eco and less ego. It is time to recognise the female energy in leadership is a tremendous gift to us all' (foreword written by Douglas in Devlin 2021, vii).

Over the last 15 years in her work with women leaders, Watterston has encouraged women to celebrate the feminine and what it offers to their leadership. She has also emphasised to women that they should recognise and value all of their strengths, their unique voices shaped from their gendered stories and career experiences, and approach leadership opportunities with confidence and courage. In the section that follows we consider some of the barriers impacting women's career journeys towards leadership.

What are some of the barriers impeding women leaders?

For decades there has been recognition that women working across different professional contexts such as management (Morrison, White, and Van Velsor 1987), education (Kise and Watterston 2019; Shakeshaft 1989) higher education (de Vries and Binns 2018; Quinn 2012), and STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) (Jebsen et al. 2022; Sonnert and Holton 1995) face a variety of barriers or 'endless obstructions … when they endeavour to climb

the various levelled stepping stool' (Gull 2019, 38). The term, 'the glass ceiling' was coined in 1987 to describe barriers such as family responsibilities, gender discrimination, and a lack of mentoring opportunities facing women executives (Morrison, White, and Van Velsor 1987). Over 35 years later, Gull (2019) argues that 'the glass ceiling has remained a cutting-edge issue, with numerous overviews and reports … embraced globally' (38). Among the workforce barriers she cites are 'gender based generalizations … discrimination and inappropriate behaviour … absence of coaches and good examples … humble assignments instead of testing assignments that would advance their [women's] vocations … attitudinal and hierarchical predispositions' (Gull 2019, 38).

An important piece of research conducted by Coleman (2020) focused on women leaders' perceptions of barriers and facilitators regarding their career progression. Coleman interviewed 60 women leaders from the United Kingdom, approximately half of whom were drawn from the public sector (e.g. secondary and tertiary education, BBC, hospitals) and the other half from the private sector (e.g. advertising, retail, law, finance, energy, and property development). Common to all of the women leaders' experiences were the following barriers 'a masculine work culture; discrimination and the glass ceiling; gendered stereotyping; and the difficulties of combining work and family life' (Coleman 2020, 233). However, there were some nuanced differences identified by the women leaders in the sample. One example was a strong masculine culture seen to be 'thriving in the private sector' (Coleman 2020, 242) particularly in male-dominated industries in contrast to some progress having been made in education. Three career facilitators identified by all of the women participants were access to mentoring, a supportive workplace, and networking opportunities (Coleman 2020, 244).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore all of the aforementioned barriers identified by Gull (2019) and Coleman (2020) or to consider the myriad of theories that can help explain the plight of women leaders. For this reason, the following discussion is limited to considering just four barriers. Three of them were raised as key issues by the women leaders in Coleman's study – gender stereotyping, mentoring, and family responsibilities (which we refer to as 'women follow a different career path'). We have included a fourth barrier – women's inner barriers – as these were identified as impacting upon women educational leaders' advancement in Shakeshaft's (1989) seminal book, *Women in Educational Administration.* A further reason for selecting these four barriers is that they are ones women educators in our Australian women in leadership programmes have repeatedly identified as problematic for them.

Gender stereotyping barrier

Since time began and to this day, women continue to experience double standards. What is acceptable behaviour for men is not acceptable for women since

stereotyping and limiting notions of gender still prevail. Gender roles indicate that there are certain traits and behaviours that are promoted and acceptable for women such as wife and mother whereas men's social roles are broader (Tuttle 1987, 294). An example provided by Coleman (2020, 243) that fits here was an experience relayed by one of the women participants, a Head teacher, who was interviewed by a head-hunter who asked her how she would discipline boys who were taller and bigger in size than her. This type of question is an unlikely one to be asked of a male Head teacher.

Women political leaders interviewed by Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala (2020, 153) referred to the 'style-gender conundrum' which means that the women leaders learned to adjust their behaviour knowing that if they didn't, they would be judged harshly due to gender role stereotyping. Similarly 'code switching' (Mapedzahama et al. 2023, 22) refers to how culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) persons adapt their behaviour (i.e. speech, appearance, etc.) in order to get ahead and 'fit in' to their organisations. In fact, 83% of 374 surveyed CARM women participants in a recent Australian study by Mapedzahama et al. (2023) indicated they experienced pressure to act like existing leaders, most of whom are male.

Gender stereotyping is sometimes called the 'double bind' (Catalyst 2007, 3) which means that for women in leadership, you are 'damned if you do, doomed if you don't.' Examples of double binds for women leaders include either being too soft or too hard; either being liked or competent but not always both; and either facing higher standards or lower rewards (Catalyst 2007). A Year 12 high school student captured it well in an article she published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on International Women's Day:

> Women are expected to be strong, but sensitive. Emotional but not hysterical. Ambitious but not too ambitious. Career women, but also managing the mental load of a household and family. Smart, but not so smart it becomes intimidating.
>
> It is bias – conscious and unconscious – that allows these double standards to exist. And this bias exists in every sphere of our lives, undermining our voices and suppressing our ability to progress. (Ahelee Rahman 2022, paras 5 and 6)

A good example of this bias is the Howard/Heidi study discussed by Sandberg (2013) in her best-selling book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. In it, a group of College students read a case study of a successful entrepreneur named Heidi while another group read the same story but the entrepreneur's name is changed to Howard. While both groups of students praised the achievements of Howard and Heidi, Howard was deemed likeable by his group while Heidi was viewed as selfish and not the type of person you would want to employ. This experiment reveals double standards and gender-based prejudices.

Another derogatory term, 'Queen Bee,' is given to women who have made it into senior leadership by imitating archetypical masculine values and behaviours (Mavin 2008). The '"Queen Bee" is commonly constructed as a bitch

who stings other women if her power is threatened' (S75). There is no equivalent term for men.

Mentoring and sponsorship: for whom, when and how

Early mentoring research and studies identified access to traditional mentoring relationships as being a key barrier impacting women's advancement and career progress. Kanter's (1977) ethnographic study of power and career structures in organisations found that male managers sponsored talented male staff rather than choosing to support the career development of women who were equally talented. The reason for this was 'homo-social reproduction;' the idea that likes attract, and males chose other men because they were in their own image. Sponsorship mentoring tends to be associated with traditional mentoring because mentors use their power and resources to open doors for the protégé (i.e. the person who is mentored) by making them visible. In contrast, developmental mentoring is more about the mentor acting as a sounding board, guide, and friend, while helping the protégé learn and develop (Clutterbuck 2004).

In recognition of the limitations of accessing traditional mentoring relationships for women and members of different diversity groups, and acknowledging the great benefits that mentoring can yield for those who are mentored, public and private organisations in Australia and elsewhere introduced professional/formal mentoring programmes in the late 1970s (Ehrich 1995). These programmes often targeted novice and senior members of staff and matched beginners to those more experienced in the workplace who would support, guide, and help them with their work.

The argument that women continue to be overlooked in traditional mentoring relationships has been made in the literature pertaining to women academics, especially those in non-traditional areas and senior management (see Levine et al. 2011; van den Brink and Benschop 2014). According to Mapedzahama et al. (2023), CARM women noted they had limited access to networks and sponsors as well as more formal programmes within their organisations. Hence, they missed out on the support and advocacy these types of connections provided. The downside of traditional mentoring arrangements is that they are elitist and individualistic; not everyone desirous of working with a mentor is chosen (Ehrich and Kimber 2016). The women leaders in Coleman's (2020) study were acutely aware of how men are favoured when it comes to informal or traditional mentoring and sponsoring. Traditional mentoring exists in all organisations and in schools where there is an old boys' club culture, boys will be given preferences (Alberta Teachers' Association, [ATA] 2020; National Excellence in School Leadership Initiative [NESLI] 2018) by being asked to act in higher duties which is an example of sponsorship mentoring.

Back in 1991, Ehrich argued for the introduction of a professional mentoring policy and programmes for women educators in Government schools because at that time, women were greatly under-represented in school principalship. For example, in 1993, female principals in Queensland and in New South Wales made up 20% and 25% of the total number of principals respectively (Ehrich 1995). The WISL programme that was run by Watterston and Ehrich targeted women interested in leadership and provided them with a mentor for the duration of the year-long programme. Among these women were teachers, middle leaders, aspiring and new principals. That these programmes attracted high numbers of participants suggested to us there was a strong need in the education community for this type of leadership development. In our programmes, we had both male and female mentors who showed great commitment to supporting the ongoing development of the women leaders they mentored.

In a review of professional development needs of middle leaders, Fluckiger et al. (2015) argued that there are more leadership programmes available to principals and aspiring principals than for middle leaders (those educators who hold a formal leadership position but are also responsible for teaching) (Lipscombe, Grice et al. 2020) and those that do exist for middle leaders focus on supporting them to aim for the principalship (Fluckiger et al. 2015). A number of authors (see Fluckiger et al. 2015; Grootenboer et al. 2021; Gurr 2019; Lipscombe, Grice et al. 2020; Lipscombe, De Nobile et al. 2020) have argued that there is an urgent need for quality professional learning for middle leaders given the key role they play in building teachers' capacity and leading school-based change. Mentoring has been identified as essential for middle leaders (Blake and Fielding 2023) to help them grow into their role yet Fluckiger et al. (2015) and Blake and Fielding (2023) suggest that middle leaders lack mentoring opportunities. One explanation provided by Gurr (2019) is that principals, who are those who are in a prime position to mentor middle leaders, often lack the time to do the mentoring. Moreover, Gurr (2019) points to a lack of support provided by senior leaders. Given the recent spotlight on middle leadership via a set of draft standards currently being trialled in Australia (AITSL 2023) and the release of a substantive report into middle leadership in NSW public schools (Lipscombe, De Nobile et al. 2020), it is anticipated that middle leaders' professional learning needs, including access to mentors, will become more of a system and school-based priority.

Women follow a different career and life (cycle) path

Kise and Watterston (2019) argue that men tend to be more strategic when it comes to planning their career than women who tend to choose a leadership career later on, or which may happen more accidentally depending on timing and circumstance rather than intentionality. Women's career development often looks very different from men's whose journeys have been described as

'typically linear, upward trajectories' (Bierema 2016, 127). Women's career paths have been described as taking 'detours' and 'diversions' (Bierema 2016, 127) often in order to care for children, elderly parents, and/or others. As Kise and Watterston (2019, 26) argue, women's 'career histories are characteristically relational [with a] larger intricate web of interconnected people in which women tend to make career decisions in relation to their impact on others, most notably family.' Having breaks in a career can have consequences for a woman's opportunities for promotion due to less time in the role than their male counterparts. Yet, as Broderick (2008) says, superimposing the male career model on female life cycles is not likely to work now or into the future. It's noteworthy that there is a special award in Australia (i.e. Elizabeth Broderick Workforce Flexibility Award) given to organisations that normalise flexible work practices and value 'whole life needs' for both women and men.

It seems that some industries and sectors are more likely to be flexible, family friendly, and take seriously the cultural norm that it is women who are main caregivers in society than others. This was the finding Coleman (2020) arrived at as she argued that the public sector (in the UK at least) is more family friendly and provides greater flexibility for women leaders than the private sector. Noteworthy is almost half of the women leaders in her sample chose not to have children; they followed a career path similar to their male counterparts. More than twice the number of women who remained childless came from the private sector and reasons put forward included long hours and demanding clients. Coleman's findings are important for two reasons: first they illustrate that some women leaders make a deliberate decision to follow a career path that mirrors the male career path, and the public sector more so than the private sector tends to be more amenable to women as they balance family responsibilities with work. Yet the difficulties of combining a family and career continue to be cited as reasons for women's reluctance to pursue leadership positions (Coleman 2020). A study of 714 teachers in Alberta regarding barriers facing women interested in leadership pointed to 'family commitments, not wanting to leave classroom teaching and concerns about the time it takes to be a leader' (ATA 2020, 3) as the top three barriers. Teachers in the study referred to gender discriminatory remarks that questioned their commitment to leadership. For example, one participant said, 'Women are often not put in roles of leadership if in child-bearing years. Commitment is questioned' (ATA 2020, 23).

Women's own inner barriers

An important impetus in all of the programmes that Watterston has run for women leaders over the past decade has been to help women confront psychological barriers about their limited confidence to lead, not being 'ready yet,' and wrestling the imposter syndrome. According to research carried out by Shipman and Kay (2014), women are deemed less self-assured than men, often doubting

their abilities, and predicting they will not succeed. This lack of confidence about their competence often means that women do not see themselves as ready for leadership and point to their perceived limited experience or qualifications as holding them back. Marianne Coleman puts it well when describing women educators:

> Women tend to be more lacking in confidence than their male counterparts. Men on the whole will apply for a job without having all the necessary examples of qualities that the job states. Women are much more hesitant to put themselves forward without having most, if not all of the qualities that the job has asked for. (2007, 8)

The term, 'imposter syndrome' means a person is doubtful of their own abilities and feels like a fraud, yet 'feeling unsure shouldn't make [a person feel like] an imposter' (Tulshyan and Burey 2021, 3). Our default position is to immediately question whether we are good enough, ready enough, or capable enough. This recognition of capability was underscored in research by Zenger and Folkman (2019) who found that while women scored higher than men in most leadership skills, data showed that when asked to assess themselves, women were not as generous in their ratings.

In the work that Watterston has done with women leaders, she gets them to scrutinise this notion and challenges them to think more positively and objectively about themselves and their expertise and achievements. This includes redefining what being 'ready' means and acknowledging we learn 'in' the role. In coining the phrase 'deselect your default,' Watterston found that this resonated with participants as a trigger to recognise when the automatic default position to deselect was getting in the way.

Why is it important to have multiple faces of leadership?

By multiple faces of leadership we mean two things: that leaders are persons who reflect diversity in terms of gender, culture, age, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, and other forms of difference, and the point that there is no one way of enacting leadership; it has many faces. Both ideas are inter-related. We begin this discussion by looking at some of the statistics pertaining to women in educational leadership, then argue for a broad perspective of diversity, and a multifaceted approach to enacting leadership.

Status of women in educational leadership

For decades, much attention has been given to the status of women and their representation in leadership positions. There is no doubt that women continue to be under-represented in senior leadership roles within many contexts including, for example, corporations and as board members and chairs (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2021), politics (Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala 2020) and

higher education (de Vries and Binns 2018; Devlin 2021). To date, they have not yet reached parity with their male counterparts (OECD 2017). As an example, in higher education in Australia, only one-quarter of women hold senior positions of deputy vice chancellor roles as well as vice chancellor roles (WomenCount Report, in de Vries and Binns 2018). At the professorial level, women make up 30% in Australia (2019 figures, Universities Australia 2020). Based on a survey of superintendents carried out in the United States in 2015, Robinson et al. (2017, 1) found that 'men are still four times more likely than women to serve in the most powerful position in education, and both women and men of color are still grossly underrepresented.'

Across the world, teaching is a female dominated industry. This is the case in Australia with 71.1% of teachers who are female in 2019 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020). Over 50 years ago, males constituted 41.3% of the teaching force and in 2019, they represented almost 30% (ABS 2020).

A promising sign in education has been the steady increase of women occupying the principalship. Based on New South Wales (NSW) Government data, McGrath (2020) found that there has been an increase in female staff in leadership positions between the years 1998 and 2018. For example in 1998, in primary schools, female principalship was 33.8% and it almost doubled to 66.4% in 2018. In secondary schools in 1998, female principals represented 22% and more than doubled to 48.4% in 2018 (McGrath 2020, 1). Yet men continue to be overrepresented as leaders (31%) relative to the proportion of men among classroom teachers (21%) (Australian Teacher Workforce Data 2021).

Statistics presented by McGrath (2020) show that the percentage of male leaders and male teachers has declined significantly over a 20 year period. These statistics raise some important questions regarding the gender composition of teaching and school leadership now and into the future. The issue of the shrinking pool of male teachers working in primary schools has seen a push by the NSW Department of Education targeting men to join the teaching force (Harris 2023). There is no doubt that increasing the male teaching pool will provide a more inclusive workplace and contribute to the diversity of the teaching force.

A broad perspective of diversity is needed

Diversity encompasses a variety of dimensions not only gender. Women leaders are not 'a unitary category of … women … their leadership is a tapestry consisting of many threads: gender, race, ethnicity, social class, religion and sexual preference' (Klenke 1996, 29). Hence, we see it is critical to move away from limiting stereotypical constructs of leadership, to perspectives that value and recognise that leadership comes in different shapes, forms, ethnicities, and genders. Fitzgerald (2003) argues, however, that trajectories of ethnicity and diversity have failed to be part of the discussion in educational leadership literature.

Perhaps this can be explained in part at least by the fact that persons of colour continue to be grossly under-represented in school leadership roles both in the US (Chiefs for Change 2018) as well as in Australia (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] 2019). For example, in the US only 13% of public school principals are women of colour and 11% are superintendents (Chiefs for Change 2018, 5). In Australia, the situation is more dire with only 1.1% of primary school leaders and .2% of secondary schools leaders who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Two percent of teachers in schools are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent (AITSL 2019, 15).

Yet a recent report by AITSL, the national body responsible for policy development and resources to promote teaching and leadership expertise in Australia, entitled, *Spotlight: Diversity in School Leadership* (2019), has argued there is much merit in having a diverse workforce to serve our nation and schools that reflect diversity. There are many advantages in having a strong culturally and socially diverse educational workforce and some of these include the positive impact it makes on students and schools (AITSL 2019; Chiefs for Change 2018); increased innovation and better problem solving (AITSL 2019, 3); improved productivity (Werner, Devillard, and Sancier-Sultan 2010) and it is ethically important since it values and celebrates difference (AITSL 2019).

Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2019, 2) claim that 'school leadership has a significant effect on features of the school organization which positively influences the quality of teaching and learning.' If this is the case, then it is incumbent on all of us (systems, schools, leadership development providers, etc.) to unabashedly support, encourage, and seek out diversity when recruiting teachers and school leaders. This would mean identifying, encouraging, and attracting women and members of diverse groups into leadership roles via a robust leadership (non-linear) pipeline.

Alternative perspectives of leadership

Our second point is that we desperately need alternative pictures of leadership that move away from the male white norm and masculine ways of leading. There are many ways of successfully leading others; there is no one right way and everyone's way of enacting leadership is likely to be individual and uniquely their own (Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala 2020). Effective school leadership comes in all shapes and forms. It is multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, rich in its diversity, and highly contextual; it does not conform to any formula. There are many faces of leadership which challenge us to move beyond seeking leaders in our own image (Kise and Watterston 2019). A focus on school leadership diversity is necessary for the ongoing innovation and vitality of schools and school systems so that different forms of and approaches to leadership can be enacted and celebrated.

Why is women's leadership development everyone's responsibility?

Schools do not become high performing in the absence of great leadership. As researchers and policy makers continually remind us, there is an empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement and there is strong evidence that principals are critical for school success (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2019; Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe 2008). Yet, there are significant challenges faced by schools and school systems to effectively identify, prepare, recruit, grow, and retain high quality school leaders. For over 10 years there has been a recognised urgency to ensure a pool of high-quality candidates, who aspire to the principalship (Watterston 2015) and with imminent retirements and fewer people willing to step into the role (Riley et al. 2021), leadership succession planning is a significant challenge. Given the increasing complexity and demands of leadership, the current critical and worsening teacher shortages, Australian schools are facing a double-whammy with warnings that unless schools can increase the supply of teachers for the longer term, 'today's teacher crisis will be tomorrow's leadership crisis' (Grant quoted in Henebery 2023, para 5). It seems that it is timely to embrace the notion of the 'multiple faces of leadership' in all phases of leadership development.

School leadership development is an ongoing process with numerous transition phases from preparation to on-boarding and career staged renewal processes, which also needs to recognise and accommodate the diversity of career pathways and options in varied contexts. Ongoing leadership development requires relevant and meaningful learning and mentoring opportunities, from engaging aspirant leaders through a disciplined and strategic approach to succession planning, to responding to the needs of experienced principals for programmes to support them in remaining current and challenged in a rapidly changing environment (Watterston 2017). To address these challenges, we view leadership development as everyone's responsibility; collectively through systems and learning organisations, and individually as advocates and learners.

Systems and learning organisations

Systems have a responsibility to support the development of their aspirant leaders, middle leaders, and senior leaders. Both principal preparation (AITSL 2015) and middle leader preparation (Fluckiger et al. 2015; Lipscombe, De Nobile et al. 2020; Lipscombe, Grice et al. 2020) is *ad hoc* which suggest a more coherent and systematic approach is needed to develop different levels of leadership. Research and reports can provide guidance on ways to do this. There are many stakeholders within a system who can play a proactive role by offering professional learning opportunities to support leadership growth and development.

For decades, mentoring has been used by systems either as stand-alone programmes or embedded within leadership programmes for the purposes of development and induction (Watterston 2015). According to research (Hansford and Ehrich 2006; Scriarappa and Mason 2014) and an environmental scan of principal preparation programmes (Watterston 2015), mentoring has been viewed as a valuable learning experience by principals. It not only has the advantages of socialising newcomers into the role of leader, but it benefits them by enabling them to share their problems, improves their confidence, and provides opportunities for reflection and connection (Hansford and Ehrich 2006; Scriarappa and Mason 2014). For women leaders across a variety of sectors and industries, it has been viewed as beneficial at all stages of their career (Coleman 2020). Feedback from the leadership development programmes we have offered to women (both senior and those in middle leadership roles) has been overwhelmingly positive in terms of psycho-social support and career development which suggests to us there continues to be a place for this type of leadership development.

It is not just the systems within which we work that have this responsibility to identify potential and support others on their journey; as key stakeholders in our education system, professional associations are key. As the CEO of Australia's largest professional association focused on educational leadership, the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL), Watterston emphasises that by its very name, it is incumbent upon all of us in ACEL to advocate for our profession and to ensure individually and collectively, we do all that we can to encourage and support women leaders and aspirants at all stages of their learning journeys. As an example, a focus on disrupting stereotypical mindsets and bringing diverse and multiple faces to the decision-making table was a strong theme discussed during ACEL's 2023 International Women's Day event.

A supportive workplace culture is deemed critical for women leaders across a variety of industries (Coleman 2020). In the context of schools, both formal school leaders and members of leadership teams have a key role to play in creating a supportive and learning rich culture where leadership development is a priority. This can be achieved by identifying talented teachers, aspirant leaders, and middle leaders and then providing them with personalised opportunities to learn about leadership and craft their own leadership identity. Invitations to act in higher duties can be an important stepping stone in helping an aspiring leader become more familiar with all levels of leadership work and roles. Leaders, then, should aim to identify not only promising teachers of all genders, but also ensure they do not overlook people of colour or members of other diversity groups when selecting talent.

Individual aspirants and advocates

Every education professional has the responsibility for their own learning, as well as recognising and supporting the growth of others through participating

in a range of leadership and learning opportunities whether these include personal reading, finding a mentor, becoming active in a professional association, engaging in formal/informal networks, or working with colleagues in one's own school or organisation.

According to the findings of a systematic literature review conducted by Watts (2022) on supporting beginning principals, three types of effective professional support include opportunities for new principals to learn from other principals; positive relationships with mentors; and supportive networks. Networks have been identified as critical for principals and are best when they are local and contextually relevant (Riley et al. 2021). Networks have also been identified as critical for the career development of women (Coleman 2020) and women of colour (Cobb-Roberts et al. 2017). Feedback themes from our own programmes indicate that being part of a network of women is supportive and uplifting, and creates a sense of community and empowerment.

Conclusion

In this paper we touched on some perennial issues that impact upon women educational leaders in Australia. We made an argument for the need to consider gender and leadership even though the last 20 years have seen some moderate gains for women educators, particularly those occupying the principalship in Australia. Globally, and across different professional contexts, we recognise that these gains have not been widespread as evident in the statistic of women holding just 29% of executive positions across the world (Catalyst in Coleman 2020, 235). We considered some of the barriers impeding women's career progression and these were deemed relevant not only for women leaders in education but women in other sectors and professions. Among these were the difficulties of combining family and work, lack of mentoring opportunities, gender stereotyping, and women's own internal barriers where women can be their own worst enemies when it comes to stepping in and stepping up to leadership.

In framing our discussion around women and leadership, we argued for the need for leadership to be enacted in alternative ways and by persons of different genders, ethnicities, and other diversities since leadership has multiple faces. The view that leadership continues to be associated with men rather than women (Bierema 2016) is not only highly problematic but also deserving of challenge and critique which we sought to do in the paper. In the final part of the paper, we made the argument for systems, organisations, and individuals themselves to be proactive in supporting women's leadership development. Mentoring and networking were identified as key strategies for women leaders' development in education and more broadly.

Our own research and leadership programmes we have designed for women leaders have helped us to crystallise our perspectives about the possibilities and

the challenges impacting upon women. We have been very privileged to have worked with many aspiring and established women leaders who generously shared their stories, career trajectories, and personal struggles with us. We have learned as much from them as they, perhaps, have learned from us. Working with them has underscored to us the importance that everyone has a responsibility to be a learning leader and leading learner.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Barbara Watterston has had extensive experience in education and has held a number of school and executive leadership positions across Australia within the education and not-for-profit community sectors. Currently she is Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL), a premier cross-sector professional association whose mission is to connect, support, and inspire current and future leaders in education.

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