

The Role of the Feminist Administrator

By Alana Bell

*Presented at the 18th Annual SCSU Women's Studies Conference***Introduction:**

We're very happy to be here today at such an exciting conference as representatives of The Linden School, a feminist girls' school in Toronto. We have chosen to speak about voice and authority, two very important aspects of a feminist education, and we intend to address these from three different perspectives. Beth Alexander, a junior math and science teacher at Linden, will talk about voice and authority as important elements in her feminist teaching practice. Ruthie Cowper Szamosi, whose experience at Linden goes back further than either Beth's or mine, and who is now an alumna and member of the Board of Trustees, will speak on voice and authority from a student's perspective. As a current co-principal of the school, I will begin by providing a brief historical background of the school and then discuss voice and authority as I negotiate these as an administrator.

All of us approach these two elements of feminist education through the understanding that, at a feminist institution, we must make space for multiple and diverse voices, particularly the voices of our students. We must do this with the purpose of sharing authority and creating a collaborative, non-hierarchical learning environment in which all members of the community are participants in an educational process that is ongoing and applies not only to our students, but to our community as a whole. We share this with you today for three reasons:

- 1) To explain our own practice and how our understanding of feminist pedagogy has developed over the 15 years of the school's operation,
- 2) To offer alternatives to traditional educational practices, including those which exist in more traditional girls' schools, and
- 3) To solicit feedback from this audience of scholars of girls' studies.

Our presentations, which vary in format, model our different teaching and learning styles, and for the

most part, are shorter than the 20 minute time limit because we hope to leave ample time for conversation.

Some History:

The Linden School was established in 1993 as the brainchild of Diane Goudie and Eleanor Moore, two women who had been long-time educators of girls. In 1991, Diane had been hired as the new principal of a long-established Toronto girls' school; Eleanor was the vice-principal. Together, the two stated that they intended to infuse the school with feminist pedagogical practice that was reflective of the then-current research about girls and learning. They wanted to develop a feminist collaborative model of governance and administration and a pedagogy and curriculum which included the voices of girls.

After one year, Diane was fired by the Board, who stated that they did not like her leadership style. Eleanor, as vice-principal and hence not the ultimate authority, was permitted to keep her position; the logic of the patriarchal structure was that without Diane's leadership, Eleanor was a more benign force within the school. Because existing girls' schools were unwilling to accept what Diane and Eleanor saw as necessary changes in girls' education, they decided to start their own school, and with the support of leaders in women-centred communities, Linden opened its doors in September 1993 to a student population of around 40 girls.

The idea of a feminist or girl-centred school was considered by the Canadian media at the time to be revolutionary – in 1994, *Maclean's* magazine called Linden “the discreet headquarters for a revolution”, painting the school as clearly marginal in relation to the more established and traditional girls' schools in the country. For the next 13 years, though, under Diane and Eleanor's formidable leadership, the school grew and thrived on a mission of academic excellence, girl-centred pedagogy, equity, diversity, justice, and life-long learning, and we have now reached a point at which Diane and Eleanor's revolutionary ideas are taken up in the marketing language of other Toronto schools, both a

gratifying and frustrating phenomenon when Linden itself still struggles to be known, accepted, and financially sound.

Thus, on its 15th birthday, Linden has reached a landmark moment in its history. Last year, we underwent a transition in leadership – our first – as Diane and Eleanor retired and were replaced by three new co-principals: Ina Székely, Dawn Chan and me. We have also reached the point when, for the first time in our history, we are faced with capped classes because we have all but outgrown our current space.

Finally as stated above, we have reached an interesting moment in our marketing history. As the language of our founders is co-opted by schools which have not embraced the changes in structure, environment, pedagogy and curriculum that a feminist institution necessitates, we are faced with the need to re-articulate and clarify the language we use to describe our practices. And yet, the most obvious place we might go with our language is to use the word “feminist” in our marketing, something the founders avoided because of the complex, shifting and multiple meaning of this word in the public consciousness. The question of whether we risk invoking unwanted and largely inaccurate stereotypes by using “feminist” in our marketing materials is one our three new co-principals debate about at length, and it becomes even more complicated given our students’ own complex relationship with this designation. Ask a Linden alumna, and she will proudly claim that she attended a feminist school and is indeed a feminist; ask a girl in grade 9 or 10 who is negotiating an entirely different moment in the development of her voice and identity, and the answer may be radically different.

Today, we have promised to discuss voice and authority in a feminist girls' school, and my role as a new administrator who desires to maintain the structure and traditions long-established at Linden. I am also the representative speaker for my two current colleagues and our founders, whose voices must be included in any articulation of the administrative history and structure of our school.

I'd like to discuss authority by explaining our current administrative structure and discussing

how we attempt, as leaders, to both model collaborative leadership/shared authority and to put these constructs into practice on a daily basis through our interactions with faculty, students, families, and our board of trustees. In our school, as in our society at large, authority is often intimately linked with voice. So at Linden, in our attempts to flatten typical hierarchical models, we like to ask: Who speaks? Who is spoken about/for? Do those who are spoken about/for have the opportunity for input or response?

The Linden School was established using as a lens the work of prominent feminist theorists. Our school is thus based around what Carol Gilligan called an “ethic of care,” and we attempt to encourage our girls, our faculty and our administration to be continually aware of “unpacking the invisible knapsack” of assumptions about gender, race, sexuality, ability and so on (McIntosh, 10). We also know from the work of JoAnn Deak and others that girls value relationships and work well collaboratively, and we attempt to foster this through our pedagogy and our working environment.

We are not only involved in the education of girls for their own sake, but see this as a means for creating societal change. Our classes are infused with social justice content and pedagogy, and we see ourselves as educating girls who will take on leadership roles in local, national or international arenas. As we articulated recently to a journalist who was attempting to understand the difference between our school and the more elite girls' schools in the city, our hope, through educating these girls and young women, is not only to instill in them the confidence, knowledge and skills it takes to be leaders in their chosen realms, both those in which women have traditionally thrived and those in which women remain under-represented – politics, the corporate boardroom, etc. -- we also aim to arm our graduates with the critical lens through which to question the structures and assumptions of the realms they will occupy. We encourage them to ask of traditional structures “Who benefits?” or, to turn the question on its head, in the words of one of our senior social sciences teachers, “Who gets screwed?”

As administrators, one way we can provide our students with the critical thinking skills it takes

to question traditional models of leadership and hierarchies is to model something different ourselves. For this reason, when Diane and Eleanor announced their retirement, Dawn, Ina, and I felt it was crucial that Linden maintain a collaborative leadership model, despite the board posting the job as an opening for *a* principal. For the three of us, all teachers in the school at the time, it was critical that our students and faculty, who were being asked by the school to work collaboratively and non-hierarchically, have a leadership that put those values into action. Armed with information on other collaborative leadership models and a careful articulation of exactly how the job would be shared, we were able to convince the board that our triumfeminate, as they called us, would be the best model for the school.

Thus, we ended up as three co-principals of equal authority: one in charge of curriculum and academics; one in charge of guidance, admissions and human resources; and one in charge of business and development; however, as we have found, these areas are often overlapping. Understandably, the faculty, students, and parents, who lived Diane and Eleanor's collaborative administrative model on a day-to-day basis, had no hesitation. Those who have difficulty with our model of leadership are often those who come from very hierarchical institutions with no buy-in to the Linden mission. The Ontario Ministry of Education became frustrated with us when we would not give them the name of the one ultimate school authority to put on our inspection report, and it has no option on its computerized reporting system that would allow us to assign the role of principal to three different people. Passport Canada has experienced difficulty understanding that all three of us are principals of the school and therefore are able to sign passport applications. The local media, accustomed to a different model of educational leadership, has misrepresented our model, despite our efforts to explain. Recently, as I walked to the school parking lot with one of my colleagues and said good-bye to a student who was meeting her brother, the brother, in an easily recognizable uniform from another Toronto private school asked, "Who was that?"

The girl replied, "That was my principal."

"Which one?" the boy asked.

"Both," the girl said, and the boy, obviously surprised, craned his neck back to steal another look.

The three of us are distinguishable from more traditional school heads not only in number, but also because of our relative youth and because, though together we have over 25 years of combined experience as educators, the majority of our experience comes from our work at Linden. Again, this is intentional. We wanted our girls to have access to female role models who succeed early through collaboration rather than competition, and we felt it would be gratifying for faculty to see some of their own succeed through hard work and commitment to this institution rather than see someone hired from outside to lead.

The easiest part of our job so far has been securing it, but a collaborative leadership model is not enough to create shared authority throughout the school. So how do we do share authority and reduce hierarchy in our relationships with the community as a whole? How do we encourage everyone in the community to feel invested in and engaged by the process of girls' education?

At the outset of the school, it was essential for our founders that a feminist ethos pervade all aspects of our community, from our Board of Trustees, to our faculty and students, to the physical structure of our building. Our mission, which attempts to articulate our understanding of the idea behind this particular feminist institution, guides all aspects of the school's operations. Linden is overseen by a Board of Trustees, but this board itself operates according to the feminist mission of the school. Our board is composed of members of our community who can contribute knowledge and expertise from their fields and are responsible for maintaining the vision and fiscal health of the school, always through the lens of a feminist educational and structural model. Our board includes people with Women's Studies and educational expertise, expertise in law, and marketing and media experience. We

have parents of children who attend the school, other interested community members and supporters, and Linden alumnae, like Ruthie. Unlike many boards, which come to decisions through a voting process, ours makes decisions by consensus. This way, no one feels their voice is unheard. Though we may not all agree or feel a decision is ultimately the best one, our consensus rule assures that we can at least live with it.

As administrators, we form the link between the board, who operates from a broad-picture perspective, and our faculty, who are the day-to-day practitioners of our educational ideals. Our relationships with faculty, from the hiring process, to faculty education, to conflict resolution and problem-solving, are all guided by our understanding of our mission. Faculty tend to come to Linden because of an interest in feminist and social justice education. In our job postings, we ask for candidates with a background in women's studies and in girls' psycho-social development, and we offer support for faculty in transferring their educational theory into practice and in turning a critical lens to, and often eventually abandoning, the more hierarchical teaching strategies they may have learned in the faculty of education and in other teaching contexts. Though as administrators we take a leadership role in the hiring process and the education of faculty, we share this responsibility with other faculty and with our students. Each teacher who joins our community does so only after an interview process that includes meeting with the administration and members of the faculty, and teaching a lesson to a class, who is then asked for input. This ensures that various voices and perspectives are taken into consideration in the hiring process and also that, by the time a teacher officially joins our community, she or he has had ample opportunity to get to know us and assess whether the fit works.

When a teacher joins Linden, she becomes part of a learning community not only as an educator, but as a student. Each incoming teacher receives a set of readings including the work of Carol Gilligan, Peggy McIntosh, Linda Briskin, bell hooks and others, along with the writings of our own community members, past and present. At Linden, we have monthly faculty meetings (including two

days of meetings in the summer) to review our theoretical basis and our practice, and we try to include multiple voices at these meetings. Faculty not only take in knowledge passed on by the administration but also become the creators of school knowledge, practice and policy by sharing their own research and ideas. These meetings are an opportunity for learning through collaboration, challenge and dialogue and, as administrators, we try to recognize that most challenges to our own ideas come from faculty investment in the school and an attempt to make it run more smoothly. We know that multiple voices and perspectives ultimately create a richer community better able to apply our mission.

As administrators, our daily interactions with students are different, and yet similar, to the interactions between teachers and students. One of our goals in applying for the job as a team was to allow time for us to remain in the classroom. Though we still teach classes, we were of course unable to continue teaching with the same intensity, and this is a loss. As a former English teacher from grades 8-12, I once taught all students at these levels, and though the one class I maintain is one of the greatest joys of my job, I miss this intense daily interaction with students. A gain has been my increased interaction with students of all levels, and as co-principals we see students in various contexts: we share their pride in their work when they come to our office with the dragon they've made for Chinese New Year. We become activists with them when they bring us petitions for the legalization of electric cars. We become guidance counselors when they come to us about problems with their relationships with their friends or ask us for our advice about university applications. And we inevitably play the role of disciplinarian when they come to us after having been sent out of a classroom.

Discipline at Linden, however, is not what it is at many other schools. We have few rules, our primary one being that learning must always be taking place. If a student conducts herself in a way that inhibits her learning or that of others, she comes in opposition to our rule; if the situation persists, she may be sent to see one of us. Our girls come sheepishly to our door, though they are rarely afraid. They simply know that by the time they reach us, things are more serious than if they had been solved within

the classroom. Our response is first to listen. We ask for the girl's point of view: What has happened? Why are you here? What were you doing? What were you intending to do? What are the consequences of your actions for all involved? Our response is then generally, "You have a problem. How are you going to fix it?" Our goal is to allow for the girl's voice to be heard and to have her take an active role in the solution to the problem she's created. This way, inevitably, the consequence matches the inappropriate behaviour.

Thus, when a group of grade 10 girls chose to attend a film instead of a mandatory rehearsal for our Celebration to Greet the Summer, they knew they had let down the whole community, but especially the elementary students who take these celebrations very seriously and view the high school students as role models. As a consequence, the grade 10s decided to give back to the primary community by volunteering for several days in our After School Care program. On a much smaller level, when girls are found placing gum on the bottom of chairs, they become part of the clean-up crew and clean desks and lockers throughout the school. Once, when in anger a girl put her foot through a wall, she had a crash course in drywalling so she could fix the problem she had created. At Linden, we work hard as teachers and administrators not to take inappropriate behaviour personally; we listen to girls in difficult situations to try to make sure we understand the real reason behind the transgression; we involve girls in establishing consequences, and we insist that within these consequences, learning must take place.

These are only a few of the ways in which we negotiate voice and authority as administrators. Whole papers could be written on each of them. Whole papers could also be written on our interactions with parents and our negotiating on voice and authority in our dealings with other institutions and in our marketing. Hopefully, this small beginning gives a sense of some of the large structural and functional changes Diane and Eleanor envisioned when they founded the school. One more important way of continuing to share authority and voice is for us to continue to read important texts in our field

and to turn a critical lens on ourselves.

In 1995, two years after the opening of The Linden School, Jeanne Brady wrote hopefully about a feminist pedagogy of multiculturalism. She articulated six guiding principles that should focus a feminist multicultural pedagogy. Rereading this article this past summer, I realized that, in many ways, Diane and Eleanor's vision had been profoundly successful. We succeed in our attempts to “engage in students' experience as central to teaching and learning,” as we do in offering “students the knowledge and skills that allow them to reclaim their voice and their history so as to enable them to name new identities.” We do well in providing “the knowledge and skills to rewrite the relations between center and margin as part of a struggle for agency, power, and individual and collective memory.” We “allow the space for students to reconstruct cultural differences and social identities to produce knowledge that is central to democratic principles” (85). Our founders have worked hard over the years to ensure our students are receiving the education that they and their parents come to us seeking in those early admissions interviews, and we have taken over a much easier role as a result of their efforts. It is time for us now to work toward the key areas in which we still find ourselves lacking.

Brady's final two principles of a feminist pedagogy of multiculturalism are as follows: “5. Offer a language of critique and possibility. 6. Develop a theory of teachers as engaged intellectuals.” Again, we offer our students this language of critique and possibility through teachers examinations of the power relationships portrayed and perpetuated in popular culture and through the interweaving of questions of feminism and social justice through our instruction in many of our disciplines. We are lucky also that our teachers come to us as reflective and engaged intellectuals aware of power relationships in classrooms and constantly reevaluating their own positions in relation to those of their students. We offer what support we are able to facilitate and strengthen this kind of reflection. Brady, however, offers some words of caution. In regard to a language of critique, she states that without such discourse “feminist pedagogy could be appropriated into the status quo. Feminists and cultural workers

need a language that both challenges and transforms; they also need to self-consciously reflect on and theoretically invigorate their own language from dominant groups who will constantly attempt to subvert, neutralize, and integrate it” (96). Over the past several years, we have watched as the language we use has been appropriated by other girls' schools across the city, all the while knowing that it is impossible for feminist pedagogy to work in the truly transformative way we have all witnessed at Linden in the traditional hierarchical structure of institutions which do not critically analyse their own relationships to power. It is one of our goals as new administrators to continue to develop our language of critique and to articulate ourselves in a broader field beyond our own walls in order to distinguish ourselves from schools that would claim to offer the same educational principles offered at Linden.

In terms of teachers as intellectuals, Brady notes the broad-ranging implication of this necessity, stating, “a feminist pedagogy can only become meaningful in the deepest political sense if it links the struggle for feminist justice to working conditions under which all teachers labor. This is not just a struggle over ideology but also over the relations of power in the most material sense” (99). While Linden has been effective in facilitating a highly engaged, collaborative community of inspired and inspiring teachers over the years, and while the school provides opportunities for curriculum development that embraces teacher's social and political values, we still, despite our founders' great struggles, fall short in providing some of the most fundamental needs of workers, including, and especially, adequate compensation for labour. As a school funded entirely by tuition, which must by necessity be kept low in order to accomplish other elements of our mission, especially accessibility for a diverse population of girls, we are unable to pay salaries even close to commensurate with local school boards. Nor can we offer our teachers the security of a pension program or some benefits appropriate to our largely female teaching population, such as a maternity leave top-up. As administrators we dream of the day when our finances are such that we are able to provide an example of justice in the workforce, an important aspect of feminism. One of Linden's primary goals for the

future must be to set an example in the area of women's labour. In this way we must continue working to practise what we preach, to hold that critical lens we hope to develop in our students up as a mirror to ourselves.

Further Reading

If you're interested in learning more about the works and authors cited in this paper, we'd be happy to provide full references upon request. E-mail communications@lindenschool.ca for more information.