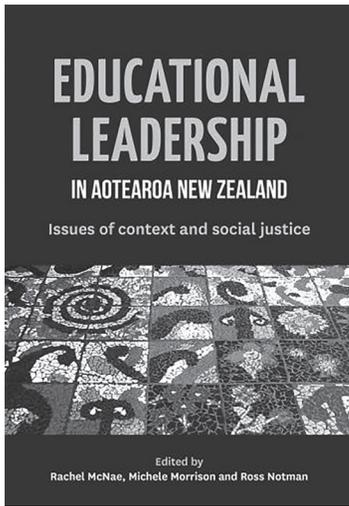


Book Review



Rachel McNae, Michele Morrison, and Ross Notman (Eds.), (2017). *Educational leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand: Issues of context and social justice.* Wellington. NZCER Press. 181pp. ISBN 978-0-947509-67-5

Ehara taku toa, I te toa, takitahi engari he toa takitahi

My strength comes not from myself alone,
but the strength of the group

This whakataukī (proverb) introduces this book and in its own way sets the theme.

The foreword to the book states “there are no answers” to be found within; if one is seeking bullet-pointed and one-size- fits-all solutions. This book moves us away from reductionist approaches to change towards holism and an acknowledgement of the “whole” (p.160), whether this be the complex situations and contexts, or the lives of people within each school or centre community.

The focus in this book is clearly on the restorying of lived experiences and the stories of practice of leaders engaged in schools and centres. The “gems” lie in the contextual nuances contained within each story and add to the “evolving tapestry of understanding” (p.165) pertaining to leading in schools with high needs and where there is a focus on social justice. The stories meet at the intersection of these two focuses.

The ten stories of leaders within each individual context (spread geographically across New Zealand) arise from research and projects which are the focus of the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN). Each chapter heading signals the focus contained within, for example, “Nothing great is easily won,” and “When the odds are stacked against: Leadership decisions that shift the odds.” Schools and centres not within easy reach of university research centres are included, as researchers themselves connect with their own sense of social justice and focus on schools and centres “dealing with challenging circumstances.”

Each story has a conceptual reflection, reflective questions for the reader or a commentary, that assists the reader to deepen their experience of “being in these stories.” The editors take us deeper by providing an introductory focus and “provocations” at the end of the book. These are stories of struggle and journeys with struggle; of leaders focused on multiple fronts and in multiple ways. Through each story you (the reader) create a very grounded and authentic perspective of where energy is placed, what focus is maintained and on what really matters.

The editors focus us on the complexity, the agency and the action of these leaders making a difference. You gain a real sense of selflessness, of individuals being “other-centred” rather than “self-centred”; of leaders giving of themselves and, at times, at great personal cost. You gain a sense of the strength of moral purpose of these leaders as they meet both human and educative needs. What is really evident through these stories from ethnically diverse, and both secular and faith-based settings, is the focus on social conditions alongside meeting educational outcomes.

In a time where the term “agency” is in focus, in terms of learning and learner agency, we gain a sense from the book of whānau and parent agency. This is heard through hearing the voice of people, whānau, parents, children, teachers, as human beings. We read stories of adults taking responsibility for student learning; of changing the story of a child and of lifting horizons.

We gain a sense of what “manaakitanga” (hospitality, respect, generosity and care) and “mahi tahi” (working together) are as indigenous concepts that are at the heart of educational leaders in Aotearoa/ New Zealand. We also gain a sense of partnership, of advocacy (need to do, not just could do). This is creative and collaborative focusing on a large scale. It also about “changing society and not just reflecting it” (p. 5).

At the heart of each of these stories is the the child or student that matters, both as a human and as a learner. Close to this heart is a leader and this book sets out, and with success, to identify and highlight the practices and dispositions of the leaders we meet in each story. You sense their individual “mana” (authority and power). You also sense their humility, love for their fellow humans and the care that each has as they journey through dilemmas. For them it is a personal journey as well as a professional one. These are leaders who never lose sight of the dilemmas they face, but are never daunted by them.

We are reminded “that leadership is not a place where you sit. It is about being and it is about doing” (p. 11). It is about taking and making opportunities rather than filling gaps. We discover leaders who know how to “rock the boat” and how to disrupt thinking and “agitate” as they challenge factors that constrain and focus on factors that enable situations and stories to change. We also discover leaders who have high expectations for learners, for others and mostly for themselves, who show relentlessness, resolve, courage and resilience.

We see approaches that focus on shifting thinking and beliefs and that lead to new actions that bring about changed circumstances for learners and their community. Leading within a paradigm of hope and taking a strength-based approach, these leaders set out to counter deficit thinking and replace it with a more appreciative way of being. There are new conversations and ways of having these that disrupt the status quo and challenge what was perceived as normal.

We are reading about leaders who have within them a particular stance as agents of change or as change agents. We understand about reshaping, rethinking, rupturing, reculturing, reframing and rebuilding. We understand how leaders create a culture of relational trust, safety, stability and security and display compassion, calmness and at times, patience. This culture is based on respect, inclusion and creates a sense of belonging.

These stories are about leaders living their values; about stories of transformation and about leaders that are transformative. As Shields (2018, p. 127) states, there are characteristics (eight tenets) that seem to be fundamental to transformative educational leadership and these are “so integrally related, that it is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss or implement them separately”. These tenets highlight equity, justice, emancipation, interdependence, interconnectedness, exhibiting moral courage, and the necessity of balancing critique with promise. *Educational Leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand: Issues of context and social justice* both echoes and adds to, what is stated by Shields.

The editors set out to give clarity to the implications that these stories will have for leaders, policy makers, researchers, pre-service educators and those involved in leadership preparation. These are stories rich in practice reality, further enhanced by the reflective commentary and conceptual frames created around them.

Book editors

Rachel McNae is an associate professor of educational leadership and director of Te Puna Rangahau o te Whiringa - The Centre for Educational Leadership Research at the University of Waikato. Rachel’s research agenda is founded on and shaped by a firm belief in social justice.

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Reference

Shields, C. M. (2018). *Transformative leadership in education: Equitable and socially just change in an uncertain and complex world* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Reviewer

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