

Punk ideals, school leaders and fashioning an “authentic” self

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Abstract

The field of education is in dire need of different ways of thinking about attracting, supporting, and retaining school leaders. We see the idea of punk as a space that may offer some leeway for thinking differently about professionalism for school leaders. In this paper, we draw on thinking about punk subcultures to recognise the ways in which leaders hold self-expression and identity as important, while also thinking about how leaders as a collective might push back against some of the narrow ideas of who or what a school leader can be and do. We present findings from a mixed-methods study of women school leaders from around the world. Drawing on an anonymous survey and interviews, and literatures from sociology, fashion studies, and cultural studies, we explore women’s experiences and identities as school leaders. The paper contributes to our understanding of professionalism and identity and also how we can better attract, support, and retain school leaders.

Introduction

Despite decades of diversity and inclusion, school leadership remains largely homogenous. In a profession still largely dominated by women, the enduring image of a headteacher remains a suited-up white man (e.g., Coleman & Campbell-Stephens, 2010; Tooms et al., 2010). This is also reflective of reality; recruiting, supporting, and retaining headteachers from diverse backgrounds remains problematic (Miller, 2019) despite extensive documentation of systemic structural and cultural barriers (Blackmore et al., 2006; Thomson, 2009). Homogeneity sits alongside the effects of ongoing change and increasing pressure on leaders: external accountabilities, work intensification and extension have contributed to rising rates of ill-health (Ray et al., 2020) and intentions to exit the profession (Tekleselassie and Choi, 2019). Adverse effects on wellbeing (Riley et al., 2021) in turn negatively affect the attraction and retention of school leaders (Lee and Mao, 2020). There is increasing concern that the reduction of interest in applying to become a school leader will lead to a shortage of principals (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018; Thomson, 2009). Taken together, these trends raise serious concerns about the strength and stability of the school leadership workforce, as well as about the experiences of leaders themselves.

We see this as an important time to examine the barriers to recruitment and retention. We are particularly concerned with the messages that are conveyed to aspiring and current leaders, signalling who can become a leader and what is expected of them when they take on the role. We have been interested for the past few years in who gets to become a leader, choosing as our focus the 'construction of the professional' school leader, how they dress for and into the role, knotting together appearance and leader 'identity'. We have also been concerned to think differently about education leadership and about education research more broadly. We see the idea of punk as a possible space that offers leeway for thinking differently about professionalism and school leaders. In this paper, we draw on thinking about punk subcultures to recognise the ways in which leaders hold self-expression and identity as important, while also considering how leaders as a collective might push back against some of the narrow ideas of who or what a school leader can be and do. Because punk has long been thought of as a space for resistance and authenticity, it sits well with an exploration of women leaders' resistance to narrow ideas of professionalism.

We build on previous literatures about the experiences of women leaders (e.g., Blackmore, 2006; Fuller, 2021; Moorosi et al., 2018) by providing further insights into the experiences of women under the contemporary and pressurised policy conditions shared around the globe. Previous research has shown the challenges faced by women leaders in recruitment and selection (Martinez et al., 2021; Moorosi, 2010); our research additionally explores the experiences of women who aspire to school leadership, and those who have left the profession. Our analysis provides a further original contribution by using the punk heuristic to analyse women’s experiences and their acts of resistance or compliance towards a normative school leader image and identity. We begin the paper with a brief explanation of our interpretation of key terms and then describe our empirical study of women school leaders.

“Punk” and leadership.

The paper is informed by multidisciplinary perspectives from education, cultural studies, fashion studies, and sociology. We group the literature into four broad categories (1) identity and authenticity, (2) issues related to fashion and self-expression, (3) issues of ‘professionalism’ and norms for school leaders, and (4) punk ideals.

Identity and professional identity

We follow Hall’s (1996) notion that identity is never arrived at – it is always in a state of ‘becoming’, and is shaped by our beliefs, experiences, and values. Educational leadership research has previously shown a deep connection between women’s identities and their work (e.g., Jones, 2017; Thomson, 2005). Identity is not simply about how leaders see themselves, but also how they are perceived by others – and that this may be with or against their wishes (e.g. Courtney and McGinity, 2020).

We take as our starting point that identity is multiple – *identities*, and that identities are often associated with particular collective aspects of social life such as family positioning, work and role, recreational practices, community membership, political allegiances and so on (Wallace and Wallin, 2015). The notion of multiple identities is often part of a modernist discourse of an “authentic self”, a primary unified self which may be

hidden when other identities are in play. As we will show, our research participants all used a binary notion of work versus authentic identity, it was the way in which they made sense of their experiences. We wondered how this meaning-making might lend itself to resistant leadership practices.

Fashion - Self-Expression, Belonging, and Uniformity

Following fashion studies, we understand 'dress' as an assemblage of wardrobe choices, hair colour and style, cosmetics, tattoos, perfume, and more (Adomatis and Saiki, 2010). *Dress is an important aspect of appearance* which takes a wholistic view, including for example size and shape of bodies, stance, gesture, age, race, and ethnicity. Dress can be consciously used to alter appearance - covering, hiding, or highlighting - and thus send particular "identity" messages which variously align or challenge norms or expectations. Appearance and dress signal "who we are and where we belong" but institutionalised or systemic racism, sexism, ableism, and ageism preclude and exclude on the basis of dress and appearance (Yates et al., 2017). Dress and appearance function as a marker for how leaders shape themselves and are shaped into an occupational group, collective identity, and role (Heffernan & Thomson, 2020). There is evidence that women are judged more harshly for their appearance than their male counterparts (Lennon and Johnson, 2019), and that they have to deal with additional complexities of sexual objectification, further affecting their wardrobe and appearance decisions (Kaiser et al., 2001).

Extensive research has provided evidence of the labour performed by women to fit expectations of appearance and dress. Of particular relevance is the aesthetic labour performed by working women, in which women are faced with additional temporal, financial, and emotional costs associated with these expectations. For example, the financial cost of the 'right' wardrobe, hair, and cosmetics – on top of the temporal cost of the time taken for grooming and maintaining an appearance that meets expectations (Heffernan & Thomson, 2020). These costs are borne by women alongside the additional emotional energy expended to make decisions about what the 'right' look is, the emotional pressure for those who do not fit dominant expectations for appearance or societal beauty standards, and the gendered implications for women (Elias et al., 2017). Researchers have highlighted the complexities and experiences of the aesthetic labour of women in education

settings. For example, Lipton (2021, p. 777) explored the gendered nature of aesthetic labour for women working in universities, and the “personal, emotional and physical costs, as well as pleasures” for women academics regarding clothing and appearance. Lugg and Tooms (2010, p. 79) revealed the implicit and explicit expectations facing women leaders to look a certain way: “leadership required a particular presentation of self, centred on clothes, hairstyle, weight, race and supposed sexual orientation, to ‘pass’ as a real educational leader”. We build on the foundation of these papers to explore the tensions for women in leadership roles; they must be seen to enforce dress and behaviour norms for their teachers while also being subject to the norms and associated pressures themselves.

Professionalism, Norms, and Expectations for School Leaders

There are long-held normative ideas about ‘professionalism’, which are evident in the sexism, racism, ageism, and ableism inherent in identifying, recruiting, and hiring aspiring leaders (Blackmore et al., 2006; Moorosi, 2010). Educational professionalism is often associated with appearance (Bair, 2016; Sheridan and Tindall-Ford, 2018). Women who are classroom teachers in particular are required to ‘dress’ themselves into the role (Rutherford et al., 2015), as are senior and academic women (Lipton, 2021; Lugg and Tooms, 2010). Academics who see themselves as part of subcultures including punk often feel pressure to modify and conform (Parkinson, 2017; Sklar and DeLong, 2012). These examples are not disconnected from each other - nor from the power of expectations for image and dress. Expectations about uniformity of appearance send clear messages about what is/isn’t expected, what is sanctioned, who is welcome, who is powerful, and who needs to change themselves to fit.

Punk, Authenticity, and Identity

We take punk as a key heuristic in this paper. Punk means different things to different people and has arguably taken on a life of its own (O’Connor, 2016; Thompson, 2004). Common perceptions or discourses associated with punk tend to reduce it to narrow, easily recognisable or iconic elements (Laing, 1985; Sabin, 1999). The reality of punk is much more ephemeral - an assemblage of political and social ideals, music, art, fashion, writing, relationships, and interactions. O’Connor (2008: 1) cautioned against narrowly defining

punk ideals, noting that it “is a mistake to regard punk as a thing and then to argue about its true spirit or meaning. Punk is an activity or a series of activities that take place in time”.

We use two key ideas associated with punk subculture. First, that punk is about authenticity. As O’Hara (1999: 36) puts it, punk is “an idea – think for yourself, be yourself, don’t just take what society gives you, create your own rules, live your own life”. The second key idea is that punk is a refusal to accept the status quo. Thompson (2004) suggests that “punks cannot fully imagine what the better world would look like but they refuse to accept the one that they know as final”.

These two ideas resonate particularly with the work of women in punk. From The Slits “typical girls” - “predictable... can’t think clearly... feel like hell ... don’t think well ... don’t rebel” - to X Ray Spex – “identity is the crisis, can’t you see identity, identity, when you look in the mirror do you see yourself, do you see yourself?” – women in punk were concerned with the ways in which their selves were framed and stifled. They snarled and screamed their opposition to the construction of narrow gendered identities. Patti Smith encapsulated the longing to be elsewhere, to be somebody else, unconstrained, free - “Do you like the world around you? Are you ready to behave? Outside of society, they're waitin' for me. Outside of society, that's where I want to be” And The Raincoats’ “I’m no one’s little girl” and Poly Styrene’s battle cry “Some people think that little girls should be seen and not heard, Oh bondage up yours” leave no room for imagining a continuation of the gendered and raced status quo. Punk has evolved over time and supports different forms of feminist resistances, not all of them the same. Bag (2012, p. 237) reflects on early punk as “a time and place where gender roles were discarded, where women were free to do as they pleased because no one had time to worry about what they should or should not be doing”. The Riot Grrl movement of the 90s evolved as a feminist response to the masculinised music scene (Sklar, 2013). More recently, Pussy Riot have taken up punk music, sounds, and attitude as an “art form and method for their political activism”, with analysis showing an emphasis on political intervention rather than on the music itself (Wiedlack, 2015, p. 3). What remains consistent throughout the evolution of punk and feminism are themes of resistance, antihegemony, and rejection of gendered expectations for appearance and behaviour.

The twinned ideas of authenticity and resistance also have purchase for understanding our participants' reflections on their experiences in leadership, and they form the basis of the forthcoming discussion. We explore the notion of leading in ways that are meaningful and authentic for participants, as well as the ways that participants push back against some of the implicit and explicit expectations of women in leadership.

There is a thriving academic literature on punk, ranging from cultural and sociological studies about punk subculture, to punk in education research. Punk ideals open up opportunities to see things differently and shed light on experiences of working against norms, subverting expectations, and living lives that follow a different path than the mainstream (Laing, 1985; Thompson, 2004). Punk emphasises self-expression and reinvention, creativity and thinking differently about the world (O'Hara, 1999; Sabin, 1999). We are particularly interested in literature about punk women. Women's stories have been described as often being relegated to being on the margins of the stories of punk (Becker, 2012), which discounts the vital influence of women musicians (see O'Meara, 2003), the role played by women in the evolution of the sub-culture (Becker, 2012), and the centrality of women's contributions to punk art, fashion, and community (Downes, 2012). There are important contributions about ageing punk women (Way, 2021) and their experiences of ageing, identity, and authenticity (Holland, 2018). Indeed, Highmore (2017) describes women as the authentic punks, using music and appearance to assert themselves in popular cultures, as opposed to the commercially oriented posturing of their male peers. There is not only an erasure of women in the history of punk but also an ongoing white-washing (Aucone, 2018, Stinson 2012).

There are times when punk concepts may not sit comfortably when writing about leaders in positions of relative power in traditional hierarchies, who do not necessarily identify as punks themselves. However, research about using metaphors as analytical tools suggests that the times where metaphors break down or do not necessarily fit comfortably or easily onto data are opportunities for more interesting analysis (Sharp et al., 2005). Punk ideals are not entirely incompatible with education systems, and our review of punk literature and education research shows that the opportunities to understand educators' lives and experiences through a punk lens are plentiful. Alongside the other articles in this issue, education researchers have written about punk pedagogy, punk leadership and

teaching practices, and punk curriculum (Cordova, 2016; Parkinson, 2017, Romero 2021; Sabin, 1999). Punk literatures speak with leadership research that explores the importance of authenticity for leaders, being able to behave and interact in ways that reflect their own identity and values (Cha et al., 2019). Effective leaders are perceived as being authentic when they enable strong relationships, and more meaningful connections and interactions with wider school communities (Eagly, 2005). There are also wellbeing benefits for leaders in being themselves (Black et al., 2017); when external practices and actions manifest reflect internal identities, we experience less internal conflict. This may be particularly important for school leaders who are already at heightened risk of stress, burnout, and poor health (Riley et al., 2021). Minimising the negative effects of expecting leaders to work inauthentically may be a small but important step to mitigating some of the external pressures of the current policy climate (Whiteoak & Thomson, 2017).

Our Study

Our study uses wardrobes as a lens to explore the identities and work of women school leaders. We began in 2019 with an online anonymous questionnaire of 427 current, aspiring, and former school leaders recruited via our personal social media accounts; this was a voluntary but purposeful sample. The survey focused on wardrobe choices, advice given to aspiring women leaders, attitudes to dress and feelings about the role and expectations. Other than demographic information, the questions were all open-ended text and thus more like an online structured interview; many respondents wrote long answers. Women leaders, former leaders, and aspiring leaders from the United Kingdom and The Republic of Northern Ireland, Australia, North America and Canada, Bangladesh, Finland, Malta, Poland, Norway, and Sweden responded. Respondents represented a range of schooling sectors and types – from early childhood through to further education, and public and private schools.

The study's second phase is now underway, comprising loosely-structured interviews with women about their experiences of school leadership, appearance, and identity work. We have so far interviewed 11 women from the United Kingdom and Australia. They are from different career stages - aspiring, current, and retired leaders. Interviews have lasted between 30-60 minutes and have been focused on exploring the themes generated by the

questionnaire, as well as asking about how remote-working during COVID-19 has affected their experiences. Importantly, we note here that only two of our interview participants specifically identified themselves as aligning with the punk movement in their own identity work. But we are not exploring stories of ‘punk’ educational leaders; instead, we seek to use punk as a way of thinking differently about leadership and leaders.

We undertook a reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). We began independently, informed by our ongoing discussions about the questionnaire and the literatures we had both been reading. We then discussed and reflected together on the themes, refining them as we shaped clearer pictures of our understanding of participants’ experiences. The results and discussion below draw from both the questionnaire and interviews and explores ideas of professionalism for school leaders, and the place of authenticity for women in leadership roles. We have intentionally preserved longer quotes from participants in some sections, to foreground their meaning-making processes.

Discourses & Perceptions of School Leaders as Public Professionals

All responses to our questionnaire highlighted the ‘uniform’ many women adopted when they took on a school leadership role, or when they aspired to leadership. They described wearing navy, black, or grey suits, tailored dresses, and heels reminiscent of business-wear. They also described making conservative choices about hair, makeup, and accessories. Many participants described losing a sense of their individual style and personality. They had a very different wardrobe outside of school hours, largely consisting of loose-fitting clothing, jeans, sneakers, and prints. Some participants said they incorporated some individuality into their leadership uniform through colourful brooches or scarves, interesting shoes (usually heels), and bright lipstick. Most did not feel comfortable breaking too far away the uniform jacketed norm. Importantly, women wrote about the way the ‘uniform’ enabled them to feel confident in their leadership, and ensure they were perceived as competent and professional leaders.

Some women also reported their lack of interest in taking on a leadership role because they did not want to change their appearance. Others described unsuccessful attempts to secure a leadership role, and then being successful after changing their hair or wardrobe to fit the normative expectations for leaders in their chosen school communities. Similar stories are evident in the literatures about academic women who change their wardrobes when taking up leadership positions (Green, 2001) or teachers who adopt a particular wardrobe as part of their identity work (Rutherford et al., 2015). This phenomenon is also evident in fashion sociology literature, where it is not uncommon for people to change their wardrobes when taking up new positions as a marker of belonging to a particular occupational group (Lynch and Strauss, 2007).

In interviews we asked participants what they thought about professionalism and how that was reflected in expectations and norms about appearance. Participants described the implicit and explicit expectations set by their own leaders and by formal dress codes. Most evident in participants' responses was that presenting an image of 'professionalism' was deeply important, and that context and the perception of others dictated what was considered 'professional'. While there was a broad description of professionalism regardless of context apparent in the questionnaire, interviews showed nuance - looking and acting 'professional' differed depending on the types of schools participants worked in, the expectations from communities and clientele within those schools, and the geographical location of those schools. We explore each of these contextual features in turn below.

Professionalism and Context

The type and focus of the school mattered for participants' understanding and enactment of the 'professional' leader. School type afforded some participants freedoms, while other contexts limited the ways leaders felt able to dress or present themselves. For example, three interviewees described their time working in all-boys' schools, and the efforts they went to in order to hide their bodies. One participant, Melissa, described her experiences:

I started my career as a teacher in a boys' school. I was at an all-boys' school and I was the only female apart from the 50-year-old divorced librarian. And I was 21. [...] So I imagined that I would start my teaching career wearing some kind of cool

dresses and things. I wore trousers every day in that job and long skirts [...] because I actually felt really uncomfortable revealing myself, revealing my body too much.

Melissa's sentiments were echoed by other participants who described wearing long trousers, long-sleeved and high-necked shirts, and loosely-fitted clothing. This is a trend evident beyond school leaders, with Kaiser et al. (2001) finding that women academics worked to neutralise their sexuality through their wardrobes, and Gau (2010) noting that dress codes for work across multiple fields are primarily aimed towards policing women's clothing. For participants in this study, professionalism seemed to require women to render their bodies neutral or invisible.

Other contexts afforded participants opportunities to express themselves much more freely. Claudia, a middle leader, was aware that her school's focus on arts and creativity afforded more freedom for all staff to express their individuality. She commented:

I'm still not immune from the [self-doubt of] "is this too much, [...] should I tone it down a little bit?" [...] "Is what I'm wearing shockingly bright?" I do [...] wonder if I could dress like this and go somewhere else and have a leadership role. It would depend. Like, could I continue dressing like this if I became a deputy principal? [...] My context does really enable me to do what I want, but then maybe there's also that thing of the longer I do it, the more ingrained it is, the more I see it as non-negotiable. So, if I did go somewhere else it would be, "well this is what you're getting. If you are challenged by a woman in a bright dress, then that says more about you than it does about me, and you don't deserve me".

Claudia's emerging confidence in dressing as an authentic self chimes with narratives of the punk movement where people could be themselves and create their own rules (O'Hara 1999). However, Claudia's reflections revealed the tension for women leaders who stand out beyond the norm in what is still a largely traditional profession. Her comments about being unsure about whether she could continue to dress authentically in a different context, and the self-doubt that creeps in at times, reflected a struggle to want to be taken seriously as a school leader and to fit into the profession, but not at the expense of her identity. Dress, fashion, and wardrobes were key to communicating identity, demonstrating belonging to a particular group and occupation (Lynch and Strauss, 2007).

Other participants shared similar stories of using wardrobes to signal their belonging within their particular context. One participant, Melissa, worked in a high-fee paying school in England “around the corner from Buckingham Palace”. She reflected on the way wardrobes sent a message to parents and communities that she, as leader, understood what mattered to them. She noted that:

you had to dress for work beautifully and there were dress codes about what that meant. And because the population was wealthy – as in the parents and families – it became more apparent what you were wearing mattered.

These parents were “Russian oligarchs and famous, wealthy celebrities” with high expectations about leaders’ appearance, and Melissa noted that “it mattered” she was aware of and seen to be responding to those expectations:

And I think [the definition of professional wardrobe] has to be deeply connected to place, and the people that you’re actually serving. [...] It would have been inappropriate for me not to have thought about it in that particular context [...] I suspect if I had not cared about my wardrobe in that particular context, it would have impacted my favour with the parents.

Melissa concluded that “your dress as a leader is actually not just about you. [...] it’s actually about thinking about who you’re serving, as well as your own identity”. In contrast to Claudia’s emerging confidence in dressing in ways that pushed back against expectations from the school community or the wider profession, Melissa adapted her appearance to meet the expectations being set by wealthy community members, thus revealing the power imbalance between powerful community members in a high-fee-paying school and the often precariously employed teachers and leaders who might inhabit those schools.

Leaders are often subject to surveillance and hyper-visibility, their behaviours and appearance scrutinised and often freely commented upon by community members, students, and staff, as we now explain.

Hyper-Visible Professionals in Context

Though women described having a work uniform and a weekend/personal uniform, the latter was also heavily dependent on context. Women who lived away from the school community were afforded some anonymity in their down time - particularly important, given evidence of the intensification of principals' work (Riley et al., 2021). 'Local leaders' who lived in the same locality as their school found it doubly difficult to step away, a problem given that personal time is at a premium for many school leaders (Heffernan, 2021; Thomson et al., 2021). Leaders in small communities, or those living within their school district, are constantly on display; they are a recognisable figure within a community.

Women told us they felt the possibility of being recognised in the community resulted in needing to look 'professional' at all times, even in their own time. Celeste, a school leader from a high-fee-paying school in Australia, described her experiences:

If I'm going to a shopping centre or something that's near where my school is, then I also have to think about how I might be appearing out in general public if I think I'm going to be seeing colleagues and families [...] that awareness does affect the way that I dress and present in order to leave the house and go to that place, because I'm aware that I'm potentially representing my workplace while I'm out in public too.

This situated awareness extended beyond appearance, to behaviours and interactions with the community. Leaders, particularly those in smaller communities, have described the visibility that accompanies being recognised as a principal, and the feeling of living in a 'fishbowl' (Lock et al., 2012). Celeste elaborated, "I do think that there's something about being a school leader that does mean you're probably expected to behave in a certain way, or at least a positive and respectful way everywhere, not just at work".

The hyper-visibility of leadership is even more pronounced for leaders in rural communities. One participant, Jan, described the way she shaped her life outside of school to minimise encounters where she would be seen as outside of her principal self. Jan described herself as not fitting the expected mould of a principal in one of the small towns where she worked in the 1980s and 1990s during her career. She arrived in a town where the community had hoped for a male principal, sporting a punk-esque haircut and

fashionable, brightly coloured suits. She stood out in ways that sometimes resulted in negative attention and treatment from community members. Her experiences reflect Blaise et al.'s (2019, p. 282) writing about punks who refused to embody the expectations to be "sweet, feminine, gentle, modest-but-available, attractive young [women]" and consequently experienced derision, harassment, and violent responses for pushing those boundaries.

Jan re-shaped elements of her life and routine in response to this hyper-visibility and unwanted attention. A marathon runner, she scheduled her daily runs for 4am so that nobody would see her. Further, she described being transferred to a larger centre and the relief that accompanied being less visible: "you can be anonymous [in a larger city]. I could run in the day, not have any problems about being accosted or abused [...] that was a really pleasant respite". Jan's move beyond the hyper-visible role of principal also marked a shift of wardrobe. She described giving away her work suits: "they gradually disappeared [...] I wasn't dressing corporately anymore. I was still dressing fashionably, but I didn't need to prove all this, essentially, to the community anymore. I was doing my own thing so I could dress how I liked."

When we heard Jan's story, we wondered who it is that needs to change, the leaders or the communities. One participant, Melissa, suggested that if the expectations and norms about leadership were more inclusive, then a more diverse group of people could aspire to, and become, school leaders.

I think about a friend of mine who's probably one of the best pedagogical leaders that I know. She's now in her early 60s and doesn't have that kind of confidence in what she'll wear in her wardrobe and is just trying to work out whether she finally goes for a principal role, which she absolutely should. She has a PhD and everything actually. And that's the barrier.

If the expected image of a 'professional' school leader stops worthy people from aspiring to the role this is a problem. Our participants suggest that if leaders can overcome that initial hurdle, there can be a shift in perceptions and experiences as women progress through their careers. Over time, some participants who adopted the uniform of leadership early in their

careers began to push back against expectations. They found ways to align more closely what they described as their “authentic selves” with their professional selves. We see “punk” as an opportunity to bring new perspectives to these shifts in participants’ ‘professional’ identities.

Punk, Authenticity, and the ‘Professional’ Head Teacher

In the following section, we analyse the data through two different lenses associated with punk – pushing back against the status quo, and notions of authenticity. They offer generative ways of exploring women’s leadership experiences. In this section we grapple with women’s descriptions of their growing ‘confidence’ and we recognise the complicated discourses surrounding this concept. We do not position the issue of confidence as being one that is participants’ ‘problem’ to be solved. Rather, we recognise that women’s experiences are shaped by the pressures, challenges, and expectations associated with the leadership norms we have already discussed in this paper. The stories shared by participants below offer alternative ways of thinking about how to be a leader in today’s schools, and how punk might offer a way of understanding women’s experiences and resistance to these norms.

Confidence in Pushing Back Against Status Quo / Bucking Expectations

Writing about punk expression in the workplace, Sklar and DeLong (2012) argue that over time, people become attuned to their surroundings and find ways to determine appropriate attire within a workplace. Our study shows this too. It is possible that our participants developed more understanding about where there was ‘wiggle room’ for expectations of appearance. As they grew more confident in their work, they moved beyond a sense of

'being an imposter' that had initially been an issue early in their leadership careers - their perspectives about professionalism changed. Interview participants in particular reported a gradual shift away from the image of the corporate professional leader they had adopted when first taking up a leadership role. One participant described this process as 'rediscovering' herself and presenting her authentic self more confidently. Another participant, Kelly, described the way her thinking evolved and her sense that her work spoke for itself. She felt more confident in pushing back against expectations about appearance as a result:

I'm not a power dresser, but I sort of tried to emulate that to a degree, I suppose, because I wanted to fit in and I was a little bit insecure in whether I deserved to be in that position in the first place [...] I [felt like] "I don't know that I actually belong here or have the right to be here" [...] So the clothes helped a little bit because if I was with people, I fit in, I looked the same, but now [...] I feel established in my role and I think [...] I'm doing well and I feel comfortable with the work that I'm doing and I feel like my authority in the job – I have a sense of authority to say the things that I say. My knowledge is sound and I'm trusted in my work by my management. So I'm not necessarily trying to impress with that surface level anymore, because I don't necessarily need to. I feel more secure in my capacity to do the job.

Other participants described similar experiences. There are parallels in their words to punk ideals of resistance and antihegemony, particularly in relation to appearance and wardrobe (Sklar and DeLong, 2012). Way's (2021) research into ageing punk women for example showed how defiance of dress codes enabled women to express their 'true' selves by having their appearance reflect their identity more closely. This was also evident in our study where Beth, a school leader in England, commented:

It's taken me a long time to be confident to be me, or work out, "am I just doing that thing where I'm trying to belong? Or am I being me now?" But for me it's come with the longevity of career, and building up my academic credentials as well. And then confidence, and then authenticity with that. So somehow it's like a trajectory, I think, for me. It would feel fake now, if we're thinking of the opposite of authentic then, to dress in a particular type of way.

Notions of authenticity were evident both explicitly and implicitly in most participants' reflections. Authenticity, a discursive pillar of punk ideals, stands out as a way the women in our study understood their experiences. Authenticity thus offers a means to dig deeper into the ways they were pushing back, resisting norms.

Individuality and Authenticity

Authenticity is a mainstay in punk ideals. Punk ideals emphasise the importance of being authentic and not hiding or changing oneself to fit within expectations that are often deemed to be unrealistic or undesirable (O'Hara, 1999). Authenticity results in more meaningful relationships, engagement with the world, and a stronger sense of identity and Self (Cha et al., 2019). There is something punk about refusing to pretend to be someone or something you are not, and about remaining true to your values and inner self. There is of course a privilege in refusal which must be acknowledged, and authenticity that pushes back against expectations or dominant norms also comes with risks, particularly in a work environment. For example, Blaise et al. (2019), writing about a punk-inspired intervention into sexism in higher education, explicitly recognised the risks of resistance in education institutions for people who were earlier in their careers, or in less secure positions. We report two stories which represent two participants' experiences of resisting the status quo for women leaders by being their authentic selves.

One participant, Claudia, spoke strongly about the importance of authenticity - both for her sense of self, and for her relationships with colleagues and students. As a young Head of Department, Claudia frequently reflected on how her sense of confidence in her role and her understanding of herself aligned with her decisions about how she dressed and what it meant for her work practices:

I really feel as though at my school I'm not valued for being the Head of English, I'm valued for being Claudia. I think it's definitely just that kind of hangover from previous experiences. Like, at my old school all the leaders just wore boring clothes, they just wore suits of female versions of suits or a uniform of sorts, like every day a certain blouse and trousers, that kind of thing. So, I don't have a lot of role model leaders who wear what I wear. So, there is kind of that in the back of my mind

thought of “oh, this is too much. It's too much, you're not supposed to do this”. But then I just tell myself, “well it doesn't matter and obviously, they want me for who I am, so shut up brain”.

Claudia described moments of self-doubt and the work she did to maintain her authenticity. This emotional and intellectual labour, which would not be necessary if there were more generous expectations of women's appearances, was part of Claudia's work in developing her identity and sense of self as a leader:

I have to keep telling myself that I have this position because of who I am, not because of being anyone else. [...] But when I was going for the current role that I'm in, it was an open merit process and I had to do an interview and when I did my interview it was via Zoom, and I could just see myself projected up on the screen wearing a pink dress with seagulls all over it and bright pink lipstick. I know that the other candidates that I went up against were very experienced Heads of Department, and I am not very experienced. I am not what you would think of maybe, when you think of a Head of Department.

So, I just have to keep telling myself they didn't choose them, they chose me so I should keep being me. Every now and then I do [...] kind of laugh at myself a little bit and go, look at you, you're a Head of Department, look at you with your cartoon dress on [...] But then I also think that I am actively pushing back against the idea that a woman leader has to wear cute officey outfits or essentially be in [...] a masculine mould basically, because that's not the type of leadership that I aspire to project into the world. I'm not an authoritative person. I'm a caring and empathetic person and wearing these clothes means that I can establish relationships with students and staff in a way that is authentic to who I am. [...] The best thing you can do as a teacher is to be yourself in the classroom. Kids, they fully understand authenticity, so that to me extends to your wardrobe, don't be anyone else.

Claudia's description graphically illustrates previous punk writing about 'appearance labour' (Sklar and DeLong 2012; Way 2021) and how emotionally uncomfortable it can be to suppress elements of identity in order to gain more acceptance at work, or to be seen to be successful or appropriate in their roles. Claudia's non-conformity reflects Way's (2021)

notion of punk women being the “woman I want to be”. For her, this meant embracing her unique dress and appearance as one part of enacting a leadership approach that was warm, relational, and authentically her own. Despite the potentially discriminatory impact of “aesthetic fit” in employment decisions (Lipton 2021) and evidence of homosociability in employment decisions for school leader positions, where panels tend to hire leaders who reflect themselves in appearance and manner (Blackmore et al., 2006), Claudia took a significant risk by wearing a ‘cartoon dress’ to an interview where expectations, as we outlined above, tend to lean more towards sombre suits and tailored clothing. However, it was important for Claudia to continue to resist expectations that might see her suppress her individuality and personality through her wardrobe and appearance - her felt authenticity as a leader was an extension of her authenticity as a teacher, a central part of her philosophy as an educator.

The importance of authenticity was a recurring theme in our interviews with women leaders. Grace was an experienced and recently-retired English head teacher who had worked in disadvantaged schools throughout her career. She talked of herself as a Black South African woman, and spoke about the particular challenges she faced throughout her career in relation to career progression (c.f. Miller’s 2019 findings about the challenges of career progression for Black, Asian and minority ethnic educators). Grace described the importance of authenticity in her own leadership and her career. Her story indicates that context is not simply geographical but also social, relational and historically produced.

I’m South African, and the whole notion of how you present yourself was a big thing from birth, basically. So, people would talk openly about the darkness of your skin, and the straightness of your hair – because obviously the lighter you are, the straighter your hair, the better your chances of being able to pass. And of course, if you could pass, that means you could be re-categorised as a white person, and had a different kind of privilege. And so, there’s a whole raft of stories of my own upbringing, but also my consciousness of what my grandparents, and my parents went through – that just kind of runs through me, and it’s really important to me.

Grace’s concerns with appearance, difference and race continued when she became a teacher.

There was a time when I did blow-dry my hair, in my teenage years. That was more to do with fitting in, and just being the only black person in the county. I think teenagers do go through having to find who they are. But since I was teaching, pretty much I've just been better at accepting myself, and allowing my hair to just be as it is. When I went for my first headship interview, I was told to dress differently for the interview – so, I wore a suit for the first time in my life, and I blow-dried my hair. [...] And the interview that first day was just horrendous, because I spent the whole day saying, "This is just wrong. You don't feel okay, and it's just really, really horrible." I somehow or other got through it, and it was also – I was the only black person in the room, I was the only female candidate. So, it was just heavy. And then when I was called back to interviews for the second day, I thought it was about keeping the unions happy, and I was a number basically. And it was for a brand-new school, so I kind of guessed the unseen presentation would be writing my vision for the first three years of school life. And I went as me. I dressed smartly, I wore a dress, I made an effort – I looked like I was at an interview. But I didn't wear a suit, and I allowed my hair to be natural, and I embraced who I was.

And the unseen presentation was exactly what I thought it was – I wrote it, and it was my vision for education. And I said it as it was, because I had nothing to lose, because I wasn't going to get the job. And apparently that came across incredibly powerfully, and I got the job. And that was a reminder about the importance of presenting as who you really are. Especially in headship, because if you can't go as who you are, with your vision, I don't think you can do the job that well. Because it means that you become a manager, because you play to someone else's tune, rather than being a leader who is comfortable with their vision, and being who they are, and embracing who they are. And all of that sort of counts into the way in which you present yourself as a leader.

Grace's experiences show additional complexities of identity and aesthetic labour for Black women leaders. As McCluney and Rabelo (2019, p. 147) put it:

Black women face several paradoxes when deciding how to 'show up' at work. Authentic expression of their distinct gender and racial identities may promote personal well-being, but increase scrutiny and potential stereotyping, given the

hypervisibility of these identities. On the other hand, assimilating into dominant group norms may facilitate professional success, but reinforce hegemonic White male leadership models, contravene authenticity, and obscure discriminatory treatment of Black women.

Grace is not alone in making changes to her hair for interview. American research (Opie & Phillips, 2015) reveals the racism inherent in perceptions of Black women's hair in contrast to Eurocentric hair in hiring and employment decisions, suggesting that "[c]oncerns about professional image construction may lead Black women to conform to Eurocentric appearance standards and suppress identity traits [which may have...] harmful effects for both individuals and organisations" (p. 11). As well as emotionally draining for the individuals concerned, Opie and Phillips caution that identity suppression is likely to deprive organisations of much-needed diversity (see also Nickens et al., 2017).

Both Grace and Claudia described the labour and energies they put into reflecting on the expectations being placed on them to look a particular way, and how they pushed back. For Claudia this was a question of style, gender and humane person-centred leadership. Claudia's reflections explicitly show her defying expectations of not only *appearance*, but how she enacted her leadership as well. This can be seen as analogous to punk where fashion was an opportunity for young punk women to subvert expectations and express their agency while defying stereotypes about what it meant to be a female musician (Blaise et al. (2019). However, Grace's sense of self was strongly and differently political, reflecting the importance of school leaders having both an individualised as well as collective sense of a raced and gendered self. Grace's story also shows the power struggles at work around leaders' appointments and selection processes.

Claudia and Grace's stories resonate with punk ideals of thinking for oneself, creating one's own rules, and living one's own life (Holland, 2018; O'Hara 1999). In different ways, they both undertook challenging work that required them to have a clear sense of self and a willingness to refuse the status quo. Both had the confidence and acumen to trust their instincts about their own abilities and vision of themselves as leaders, and to recognise that they could bring more to their work when they were able to be authentic and work in ways that aligned with their values and vision.

Conclusion

Leadership research has a long history of exploring notions of authenticity, to which we contribute in this paper. We have suggested that as women progress through their careers and grow more confident in their work, and in their positions, they are able to become what they experience as more authentic selves. They may move beyond the ideas of ‘professionalism’ encribed through corporate attire and neutral appearances, which many participants described adopting to be seen as befitting the role, or to be accepted as part of a group of leaders. While we do not suggest that all women leaders feel the same way, we do suggest that there are four interesting implications that arise from this research.

First of all, this study adds to the body of work which shows how women in leadership positions are subjected to scrutiny and judged harshly. If this scrutiny is, as many of our participants suggest, often first focused on appearance, then this suggests that better training for interview panels might be in order. The question of hypervisibility in particular local settings also has implications for employers as it is clearly a factor in retaining leaders.

Secondly, we have opened up an area which is worthy of attention in leadership teaching and development. If it is the case that women leaders feel that they have an “authentic self”, then there is the possibility of critical conversations about how that self might sit with dominant expectations. It is from such conversations, that more women from more diverse heritages and cultures might be encouraged to become leaders, and to generate work practices that are more inclusive.

Thirdly, there is something important to explore further about women’s experiences in leading schools and how their confidence develops over time, how they come to see themselves as leaders and cement their identities and practices, and how that gives permission for other women to be themselves and opens up a pathway to diversifying the principalship.

Finally, punk ideas offer a way into thinking differently about leadership and education more broadly. We were able to see and understand ways women pushed back

against some of the potentially narrowing messages and images of professionalism, and we have used punk ideas of authenticity and resistance to explore these important stories. Punk has been suggested as a way for researchers to take up new ideas, or bring new perspectives towards existing ideas. We propose that as a field, we need to continue to challenge the status quo of research and leadership so that we don't end up asking the same questions or sharing the same stories again and again.

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