

**BEING  
10%  
BRAVER**



Edited by  
**KEZIAH FEATHERSTONE  
VIVIENNE PORRITT**

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10%  
BRAVER**

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London EC1Y 1SP

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Typeset by: C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in the UK

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First published 2021

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**Library of Congress Control Number: 2020936985**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5297-2198-0  
ISBN 978-1529-72197-3 (pbk)

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our mission is to empower more women in education to have the choice to progress on their leadership journey. To enable this, we ask women to be 10% braver and our *community* has done just that. We celebrate the brave women in this book for sharing their stories to benefit others on this journey. Countless women are applying for leadership roles and openly sharing their successes and failures to support others. Female educators have gained more *confidence*, as seen in their salary negotiations, the business cases for flexible working conditions, and their determination that leadership must be more representative of the diversity of women in education.

As we write this, we are nearing 40,000 followers on Twitter, have 30 global networks in 19 countries, and 140 volunteer network leaders who are at the core of our *community*. We also celebrated our fifth birthday in May 2020, so thank you to everyone who has contributed to this amazing journey. Due to the Covid-19 lockdown, our celebrations were held online as our *community* couldn't come together in person. It's fitting, in a way, as #WomenEd continues to enjoy its greatest *connections* on Twitter and other social media platforms of your choice. We are truly amazed at the global growth of this *community* which supports women educators to lead education. Thank you to James Clark and Diana Alves, along with the whole editorial, marketing and production teams at SAGE, whose continued faith in us enabled this book to come into being.

Our acknowledgements in *10% Braver: Inspiring Women Leaders to Lead Education* (SAGE, 2019) concluded with 'Still we Rise'. Our hope, in collaborating with educators across the world, women and men, is that we reach more women who become part of #WomenEd. And now we must all go further. We must inspire and enable women to rise, to influence, to lead and to reshape education so that it is an equitable profession in which every woman is enabled to achieve her aspirations and ambitions.

**Still we ALL Rise!**

## VIVIENNE'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Vivienne would like to thank Tony and Julie for their constant encouragement, patience and love. My especial thanks to those chapter authors who shared their powerful stories and let me help them focus on the ways they have been 10% braver; it was a joy to do this. #WomenEd helped me to recover from a difficult time and our fifth birthday coincided with five years since my last cancer treatment. Thank you to the wonderful women I have met through #WomenEd: you helped me to see there was light at the end of a dark tunnel.

## KEZIAH'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The privilege of having so many people share their stories and journeys with us is always humbling; thank you to the chapter authors for not only sharing but also redrafting and revising with such good grace and unrelenting determination. Without the love and support of my mum and dad, Andy and Evie, the whole #WomenEd *community*, my amazing Q3 Tipton team and friends such as Emma, Mike and Claire, I wouldn't be able to function, let alone get so far as to co-edit a second book. And a very special thank you to Dr Caroline Badyal who twice was 10% braver herself to believe in me – I hope your retirement is as wonderful as it deserves to be.

# ALL ABOUT #WOMENED

## GETTING INVOLVED WITH #WOMENED

We hope we have inspired you to engage with #WomenEd, and one of the best ways to do this is to join in an event, whether physical or virtual. Events are posted on our website and shared on our social media sites. Our *community* is also full of prolific blog writers, so have a look at the blogs on our website to see the issues our *community* explores. Our current networks have their own pages on our website, so do join in with your country or regional activity.

Here are some ways you can contact or connect with us:



**Twitter: @WomenEd is our main Twitter account.**

Our hashtag is #WomenEd, which we use for all our events and networking so you can engage with what is happening across our global networks. Search for @WomenEd on Twitter and a list of our current networks appears.



**Facebook: [facebook.com/womened](https://www.facebook.com/womened)**

**WWW.** Website: [womened.org](https://www.womened.org)



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# PART 5

## OWNING OUR BRAVERY



# PART 5

**CHAPTER 22:**  
Brave vulnerability - *Debra Rutley*

**CHAPTER 23:**  
Being comfortable and authentic as an LGBT+ leader and role model -  
*Claire Neaves*

**CHAPTER 24:**  
Asylum - *Felicity King*

**CHAPTER 25:**  
Slaying the dragon of imposter syndrome - *Imogen Senior*

**CHAPTER 26:**  
Moving mindsets and failing forward - *Melissa Egri McCauley and  
Jacinta Calzada-Mayronne*



# 25

## SLAYING THE DRAGON OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME

*Imogen Senior*

### KEY POINTS

This chapter will:

- Reveal how imposter syndrome undermines women in education;
- Show how fear of being found out limits growth;
- Explore facing imposter syndrome in challenging situations;
- Celebrate the value of being brave and facing your fears.

### INTRODUCTION

After a swift journey into senior leadership, I felt that I needed to demonstrate at every turn my right to my role. Feeling out of my depth, I lived in fear of being found out and making a huge mistake. Gradually, I became established and stayed in the same role for seven years. At that point, facing dramatic *changes* in my school, I had to decide whether to hide in my areas of expertise or to take a leap of faith, to be braver. I decided that it was better to choose my own future, even if that meant fighting the nagging internal voice that told me I had already overstretched my ability. I needed to face and attempt to slay the dragon of imposter syndrome.

### AN IMPOSTER IN PLAIN SIGHT?

Several years ago, in my first significant leadership role, the head came into my office. We were chatting and he looked (slightly puzzled) around the office at the wall of thank you cards I kept on every noticeboard and surface. I explained I kept the cards, letters and scribbled notes from students, parents and colleagues so that I had proof that I was good at my job. 'What!?', he said, 'Surely you know you're good at this job?' The truth was, despite my professional performance and experience, I still expected to be outed as an imposter. Somehow the cards gave me the headspace to do my job in the knowledge that I had got away with it so far. The head thought I was knowledgeable, professional and diligent but I felt that I was just an imposter, pretending to be those things.



When Clance and Imes wrote about imposter syndrome in high-achieving women in the 1970s, they identified the ‘secret sense’ that the women did not really belong (1978: 241). Although the context of women in the workplace has *changed* in the 40 years since, my personal experience is that competent women in education still doubt their abilities to a far greater extent than male colleagues do. Mohr’s oft-quoted article for the *Harvard Business Review* showed that women tend to apply for jobs only when they believe that they meet all the criteria (Mohr, 2014). In my career, this need to prove my credentials from the start has been absolute. In meetings, I would often keep quiet unless I was sure I could substantiate my own view with verifiable evidence. My instinct was to avoid taking a risk in an application for fear of being caught out at interview or, worse still, getting a job I could not do.

I have now gone further in my career than I ever dreamed, but to do so I had to take more risks than I was comfortable with. Imposter syndrome made me doubt that I deserved a leadership role and made me miss out on opportunities to grow and develop my career. I did not apply for posts that would require me to lead existing colleagues as I believed that others were more qualified than I to be leaders. I pursued CPD in areas I already knew rather than trying to broaden my knowledge, as I wanted to prove I knew what I was doing. In time, the fear of being an imposter in my first leadership role subsided. My experience and success gave me security and, although this didn’t extend to taking steps into new areas, I felt some degree of *confidence*. I believed that I could do my existing job but was hesitant about applying for a next step. I stayed away from the dragon, safe behind a shield of experience, and made no real attempt to even fight, let alone slay, it. Then, my role was abruptly considered for redundancy and I found myself asking challenging questions that would decide my future. Did I really deserve to be in a leadership role? How could I evidence my ability? Did I have the skills I needed?

I knew that I had to face those old fears to move forwards. So, in a rare demonstration of bravery, I resigned from my post and faced my uncertain future, determined to be braver than I had ever been.

## TIME TO RE-EVALUATE

Faced with a ‘crunch’ moment, I had to decide if there was real evidence that I was an imposter and attempt to find the *confidence* to take the right next steps. To gain peace of mind, I wanted to assess whether there was evidence that I had achieved any level of success in my own right. I have always told students that the first step in dealing with anxiety is to call out our fears to see if they really are concerns. I decided that I needed to do a career appraisal to see where my worries really lay. I started with my academic qualifications, what I had achieved and whether I could have got them by something other than my own effort or ability. I have four qualifications from three different universities and had to admit to myself that it was unlikely all of these were flukes. That initial step was genuinely liberating. I had berated myself for years that I should have worked harder, and I had compared myself to a standard that was not

based on any actual examples I had encountered. I had hidden behind my qualifications, like I hid behind thank you cards, and didn't accept that I deserved them through my own merit or that they were a demonstration of any aptitude.

I went on from there. I looked at each role I had fulfilled, what I was proud of and where I felt I had not done a great job. I realised that I was discounting my own impact and expected more from myself than was realistic. I had felt I needed to make up for time when I had been on maternity leave to justify coming back into a senior role, and that in doing so I had taken a back seat at times. This sense of diminished status for mothers is well documented. Correll et al.'s research suggests that mothers 'are judged by a harsher standard than nonmothers' in the workplace (2007: 1302). Whilst I was not conscious of this from others, I had certainly held myself to a higher standard which contributed to my lack of belonging. Feeling like an imposter is not an exclusively female experience but, for me, it is linked to my experience as a woman and mother. I didn't give myself an easy ride at any point of my analysis and tried to be objective. I wanted to really think about whether I had been faking it or deserved credit for the things that had gone well in my career. In short, I mentally picked myself up and dusted myself down. I saw that, whilst I wasn't perfect, my success had not been an accident. I was not a total imposter; in fact, I was a leader.

## NECESSITY AS THE MOTHER OF INVENTION

It is easier to be brave when you don't have a choice. Resigning from my role removed the luxury of self-doubt and meant that financially I had to act. Whether I felt brave or not, I had to apply for jobs. My husband and I have three young children, my husband's job was also under threat and we are very much tied to a specific geographic area. With the clock ticking, I read job descriptions and filled in application forms like there was no tomorrow. What I found, to my frustration, was that I could not predict the response. I applied for jobs that were well within my established skill set as well as those that were completely new. I wrote apologetic letters, almost defeatistly throwing my hat into the ring for jobs at all levels. This was not a great strategy. What I found was that I got interviews for the senior jobs but I got no response for the jobs I knew I could do easily. This was how I found myself applying for headships, not because I felt ready, but because finally I could see that I met the specification and I recognised that I had something to offer. Going into my first headship interview, my primary fear was that I would look foolish and massively out of my depth. In truth, I hoped that I would make a decent impression so that I might stand a chance at any other roles that came up and get some good interview experience. As the process went on, I was utterly terrified that I might be offered the job and be unable to do it, but, after several interviews, I realised that I really could be a head and that was what I wanted to be. I was so concerned with not looking foolish that I did not visit schools before I applied, which I now know was a huge mistake. I was very fortunate that I was given good advice at that point. I realise now how important *connection* is. I spoke with experienced female leaders who gave me guidance on what to emphasise in applications and on the need to abandon my

apologist stance. Over time, I realised that I needed to be devastated if I didn't get the job, because I had to accept that I stood a chance. I was no longer an imposter making up the numbers; I was a real candidate, I was fighting the dragon.

## TRUSTING MY GUT INSTINCT, NOT INNER DOUBT

Teaching can be a lonely job because so much of what we do is in our own classrooms and, although I have always worked with brilliant people, I was amazed at how much help, support and guidance I was given from all quarters and especially the *community* of women who were behind me offering support. I was given pragmatic advice from those who had been in similar situations as well as all manner of practical help. From the experience of other women through #WomenEd, I knew that I could have a place in school leadership and that I could stop internally apologising for my perceived failings.

Ultimately, in order to get over the nagging doubt that I didn't belong, I had to trust in my own abilities. I am far from the finished article, but I am no longer an imposter in the role. Being brave, in my case, wasn't a bungee jump of fear and instant reward but a series of steps forward with a different approach. The experience showed me that I can trust my gut instinct and abilities. Rather than finding myself jobless as I feared, I got a one-term contract in an independent school, teaching my own subject at GCSE and A level. I relished the new *challenge*: specifications I had not taught before, a completely new school system and environment, new colleagues and new students. The experience reminded me of what a great and refreshing opportunity *change* can be and how important it is to be in the right school. I made a conscious decision that I would pursue my career in a Catholic school, if possible, and when a post soon appeared, I was successfully appointed.

Dear reader, two terms later I was appointed as headteacher at the same school.

## SLAYING MY DRAGON

In fighting my dragon, I've learned that, as a headteacher, I need to know where I have genuine weaknesses, but I can't be paralysed by them and must accept that I am in my post for a reason. I occasionally check the sign at the front of the school to really believe that I am a headteacher. I sometimes still feel that someone is going to appear and turf me out the door, but mostly I am revelling in keeping up with my role and its *challenges*.

I am honest about my limitations and abilities as I was throughout the selection process. I respect those who appointed me as well as those who also applied for the job. If all else fails, I can take refuge in research. Sakulku and Alexander argue that 'most impostors are able to fulfil their academic or work requirements despite their

self-perceived fraudulence' (2011: 76). Armed with this knowledge and the faith that guides me in my role, I now know that I am not an imposter.

My mum died just before I started as a headteacher. I am grateful that she knew I'd been appointed and relieved she knew how my story turned out, but it was a bittersweet time. Just before she died, I told her about something I was working on and she said, 'You know, you are going to be really good at this job'. That's the seal of approval that I carry the most. I am the woman who got the job, so I will get on with it.

## Passing on being 10% braver

- Name your fear: analyse your strengths and weaknesses and whether these are reasonable assessments.
- If people you respect think you are doing a good job, recognise that you are.
- Be prepared for disappointment but don't accept it beforehand: always see yourself as a contender.
- Take support and advice but trust your own instincts and abilities. You did not get where you are by accident but because you are capable and talented.

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