The Future Challenge of Principal Succession in New Zealand Primary Schools: Implications of Quality and Gender

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Abstract: *The challenge of school leadership succession and supply is a pressing reality for many western countries at the present time as a large number of the 'baby boomer' principals retire within the next five years. In New Zealand there is a looming crisis over both supply and quality of future leaders. This paper explains why quality is such a problem and how the heritage of New Zealand's particular brand of self management reforms has exacerbated this problem. Governors or boards of trustees in New Zealand have shown a preference for male principals but there are problems about the quality of some younger less experienced male applicants. From research on Board of trustees' selection practices of principals, this paper explores some of the gendered implications of such choices.*

Introduction

The demographics of an aging workforce and in particular the imminent retirement of a large number of school principals is posing an urgent and significant challenge in both New Zealand and Britain at the present time. In New Zealand in 2006, 53 percent of school leaders (which includes principals and senior management positions) of all state and state integrated schools were over 50 years of age, and 31 percent of principals were over 55 years old (Ministry of Education, 2006a). In Britain in 2006, 24 percent of heads were 55 years and over, and there is evidence of an increasing propensity of heads taking early retirement (Southworth, 2006). Both countries experience similar problems of high stress and workload of principals, combined with low morale (Hodgen and Wylie, 2005; NCSL, 2006), which accounts for early exiting from the profession and problems in filling vacancies (Hipkins and Hodgen, 2003; NCSL, 2006).

The challenge of principal succession however, is not the same in the two countries. In Britain the main challenge is a logistical one of supply - getting the required number of principals trained in the next three years to meet the demand, and several schemes including identifying and accelerating the progress of talented leaders are proposed (Southworth, 2006). In New Zealand the challenge not only concerns supply or getting the required number of leaders in place, but also about ensuring their *quality*. The major difference between the two countries is that principals in Britain are required to be qualified for the

position of the principalship *before* they become one, while in New Zealand they are not. New Zealand principals are only offered training *after* they have become a principal, and this training requirement is not mandatory.

New Zealand's problem of ensuring quality leadership is in part due to its recent self-management administrative reforms of 1989, where legal responsibility for appointing the principal was mandated to individual school boards. Local school boards have complete discretion and autonomous power to appoint whomever they like as principal, regardless of qualifications or experience, and they do so in an environment that is totally unregulated and unmonitored. While this role may have been seen as an important part of the democratic empowering of parents in the original reforms of "Tomorrow's Schools", I argue it has had conservative consequences in relation to the gender and quality of the principalship ever since (Brooking, 2005a). Boards left to their own devices have shown a preference for male principals, and have discriminated against women applicants in a number of ways. Building on a previous paper (Brooking, 2005b), about the selection practices of boards of trustees, I argue in this paper, that the future looks bleak if the status quo is allowed to remain. While an unregulated environment may mean that New Zealand potentially has a wider pool of principal applicants to replace retiring principals, if boards continue to overlook well qualified women in place of inexperienced male principals, it does not auger well for quality leadership into the future. New Zealand and Britain share the problem of future supply of principals, but in New Zealand we also need to think seriously about interventions to ensure quality for the next generation of principals.

"We want a man, no matter what" was a quote from the chairperson of a board of trustees in research about principal appointments in New Zealand primary schools, carried out in 2002 (Brooking, 2005a). This statement summed up the dominant theme that came through eleven focus group interviews held throughout the country with 36 board chairs, 14 advisors to the board and 30 principals of urban and rural, large and small primary schools, to determine whether boards were using fair, consistent and appropriate processes in the appointment process.

Background Context

In New Zealand primary schools in 2002, when this data was gathered, women represented 82 percent of the workforce, but were disproportionately under-represented in leadership, occupying only 40 percent of principal positions (Ministry of Education, 2002). Seen from another perspective, 60 percent of principals were appointed from the 18 percent male pool of the workforce. Despite the fact that 80 percent of senior management positions in primary schools (assistant and deputy principals) were held by women (Ministry of Education, 2002), men were six times more likely than women to win a principal's position, sometimes without the expected experience or qualifications. Since the reforms began, women have been appointed to the principalship of primary schools at an increasing rate of 1 percent per year. By 2005, 43.5 percent of principals were women, and 80.5 percent of senior managers were women, indicating a very slow rise in the number being appointed from the stable group of senior managers. What has continued to fall is the number of men in teaching so that in 2005 only 14 percent of the total primary workforce were men (Ministry of Education 2006b), yet from this falling pool, the majority of principals are still being appointed. These facts suggest that there is a very large pool of well qualified and experienced women who may be hitting a glass ceiling (Livingstone, 1999).

The following discussion from one of the rural board chair focus groups, drawing on discourses of gender, age, marital status, sexual orientation and physical safety was typical of reasons given for women not being appointed, even although they usually had more experience in leadership and better credentials for the job than the men who were appointed:

> **Male board chair:** An issue with our female applicant was that she's single and would be mid fifties to sixty range age group, and she was going to be in the school house by herself. That was a concern of the board's.
>
> **Interviewer:** Was it a concern of hers?
>
> **Male board chair:** She was – well she was concerned. At the interview it was a question raised by one of the female board members: "How would you feel staying in the house by yourself, because your nearest neighbour is a kilometre away?" She didn't actually really clearly address the issue. She didn't say, "Oh I'm a black belt in Kung Fu, I will look after myself" type of thing. She sort of said "Oh well maybe I'll only be here during the week" type of thing.
>
> **Interviewer:** And yet you probably wouldn't have asked that same question of a single male?
>
> **Male board chair:** Unless he was homosexual (Board chairs from small schools, Interview 15).

This paper focuses on the gendered discourses that emerged from the data, and argues that gender alone does not guarantee quality leaders, as some boards appear to believe. This, in my mind, is something that central government needs to be aware of and take measures to guard against.

Policy Environment

In order to understand how this situation is possible, it is necessary to understand the extent of the powers, roles and functions devolved to governing bodies of schools (boards of trustees) in New Zealand's public sector reform era. The reforms that transformed governance of schools in New Zealand were part of the public sector reforms known as New Public Management (Boston et al., 1996), dominated by managerial and market influences. This policy environment has been confusing for individual school boards of trustees, as they have grappled with their new roles and responsibilities and significantly increased powers.

Self managing policy which transformed governance in schools via the 1989 Education Act, devolved the responsibility of appointing and employing the principal to boards of trustees in a manner which is more unregulated than in any other country with similar policies (Wylie, 2002). Boards are given legal autonomy to appoint the principal of their choice. In addition, there is no accountability required at any level by central government in the appointment process. Unlike governing boards in other countries with similar self-managing systems, such as England, New Zealand does not require an official representative from local government (LEAs) to sit on appointment panels in a monitoring capacity. The gender representation of the primary principalship in New Zealand, where men are disproportionately represented, reflects this unregulated context. In England and Wales where the local education authority acts in a monitoring and moderating capacity round appointment decisions, the percentage of women in principals' positions is closer to their

representation in the teaching workforce. For instance, in 2002, women were 84 percent of the primary workforce and comprised 61 percent of the head teachers (Fidler & Atton, 2004, p. 109).

Compounding the problem for women in New Zealand is the situation where there is no mandatory credentialing required prior to becoming a principal (Stewart, 2000), and where novice first or second year male teachers have been known to win principal positions (Whittall, 2001). Board of trustee training in the protocols and processes of appointments is also not provided, and yet it has been consistently reported in my research and that of others, that this is one of the most stressful tasks of a board of trustees (Kyle, 2002; Hague, 1998; Martin, 2001; Notman, 1997; Wylie, 1997). Boards are also protected against grievance claims from discontented applicants under the Employment Relations Act (Government, N. Z. 2000), which only allows a grievance to be taken out against an employer of the applicant, rather than a potential employer.

Within such an unregulated environment, perhaps it should be no surprise that boards would, and do, choose whomever they like. What was surprising in the research was the frank honesty (or political naivety) of board chairs' reasons for making the appointments they did. Gender was the most dominant reason that surfaced in the focus group interviews with board chairs.

A public example of male preference found in the study, was at the advertising stage where strongly gendered wording, created bias in two advertisements featured in the September 2003 issue of the *Education Gazette*, a Ministry of Education publication (Ministry of Education 2003, p. 69). One read, 'Have you got the balls to do this job?' and goes on to develop the metaphor of a juggler, finishing with 'Clowns need not apply'. The second advertises for a 'Headmaster of a co-educational boarding school'. This is in spite of the fact that advertising for a specific gender is illegal under the Human Rights legislation.

My research revealed that while many boards had put in place all the required H.R. appointment procedures and appeared to be working within them, at the decision-making point in the process, which is usually connected with the interview stage, it was quite common for factors other than those specified in criteria or person specifications to take over. This phenomenon has been observed by others in the literature previously (Morgan 1986; Notman 1997), and was confirmed by some of the Advisers to boards in the study. One said, when speaking about how boards come to a final decision: "I think that you still get situations where people go through the process and are guided by the principal adviser, but still would like to make the decision based on gut feeling". Another commented that "the interview day tends to stand alone, despite all the work that's gone before". The Advisers believed that all went smoothly until the interview day, and it was during the interviews that other factors often 'came into play'.

I came to understand and describe this process, as boards operating from a form of their own 'local logics' which drew on particular understandings about the nature of their local community, and the historical context and geographical location of their school. As a consequence of these 'local logics' they determined the principal who best 'fitted' their school. One trustee alluded to this by saying that it was "extremely important (for this person) to be able to fit in and be accepted by the community, by having values that worked in the community". 'Local logics' frequently privileged the gender and/or personal qualities that board members felt were important about their chosen candidate, which suited their particular school or community and ensured a 'comfortable' fit. These qualities were

typically never articulated or discussed, and did not appear in the criteria or person specifications, but emerged as an underpinning logic of decision-making practice at the interview stage, and often tipped the balance in this final stage (Brooking, 2005b, p.121). Some of these 'local logics' could be discriminatory on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, age and family status; or they could merely be based on whimsical likes or dislikes. The woman chair of a conservative small rural community spoke about the pressure her board was under to appoint a male principal:

> It's been the tradition at our school for quite a few years to have a male, and I had a regular fight on my hands with the community to break with that tradition. We also consulted with our community…a good sort of percentage who were very staunch about thinking that we needed to have a male principal. A female principal would never do (Board chair of large school, Int. 13).

The Research Approach

Methodology – Focus Groups

The main method used in this research was focus group interviewing, of six to twelve people, using focused semi-structured or in-depth interviews. As researcher, I introduced the topic for discussion and acted as a moderator or facilitator in the conversation process, encouraging participation. This allowed me "a way of listening to people and learning from them" (Morgan 1998, p. 9). Focus-groups as a method allow data to be gathered more quickly and more economically than in individual interviews, and also allow informants to react to and build upon each other's ideas and comments.

Other advantages of focus-group interviewing, raised by Krueger (1988), include the flexibility to explore unanticipated issues arising out of the discussion, which the researcher may not have thought important at the design stage. A further advantage is that this method increases the sample size of participants for a qualitative study by interviewing more people at one time, which gives high 'face validity' and believable findings.

One of the most unexpected advantages from this form of interviewing arose at a board-chair focus-group that had a number of Mäori men taking part. Cultural protocols unexpectedly came into play as one in the group (I suspect with the highest ranked Mäori status) took on the role of assisting me to find answers from the rest of the group. I would ask a question and he then challenged the responses of the others in a way that I would never have done. By research standards, this approach by a researcher would be seen as too coercive and threatening. The other men in the group accepted his challenging, in-depth questioning and gave extremely frank and honest responses. High quality deconstruction of some of the issues was evident in the transcripts as a result of this 'intervention'.

Many researchers have reported how the interaction among participants of a focus-group leads to high quality data (Wilkinson 1998). Latina feminist Esther Madriz (2000) also speaks of the way her participants asked questions and challenged each other's contradictions and responses. She said she found when interviewing women of colour, that the focus-group allowed them a voice, and acted as a form of 'collective testimony'.

One of the disadvantages of focus groups include the **possibilities of group think,** according to Minichiello et al. (1996), and there was one focus group of male principals from large schools where this did occur, in behaviour manifested as a particular form of hegemonic

masculinity. When I interrogated the tape and transcript, I realized I had worked much more actively with this group than I had done with other focus groups, in order to have these principals address this subject matter seriously.

Discourse Analysis

The transcribed focus group interviews were analysed using discourse analysis based on an approach advocated by Carol Bacchi (1999). Bacchi's approach was useful in terms of how to conceptualize the problem of women's under-representation in principalship and to suggest a way of conceptualizing how particular discourses inform practice. First, she looks at how problems are defined by policy, adopting a deconstruction approach, where she asks "What's the Problem?" Second, she analyses policy in terms of discourse, and uses this to think about the effects of it in practice. Bacchi (1999) argues for the need to rethink the political rationalist view that assumes 'problems' exist out there in the world, to an approach that embraces postpositivism and involves values representation. She calls this approach "What's the Problem (represented to be)?" and argues:

> How we perceive or think about something will affect what we think ought to be done about it… that every policy proposal contains within it an explicit or implicit diagnosis of the 'problem', which I call its problem representation. (1999, p.1).

Her advice is to "shift our analysis from policies as attempted 'solutions' to 'problems', to policies as constituting competing interpretations or representations of political issues" (1999, p. 2). She utilizes a form of discourse analysis in her focus on representations or interpretations, which she defines as "the language, concepts and categories employed to frame an issue" (1999, p. 2). She adopts Stuart Hall's definition of discourse: "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular type of knowledge about a topic" (Hall 1992, cited in Bacchi, p. 39). She also adds that discourse "refers not just to ideas or to ways of talking, but to practices with material consequences" (1999, p. 2).

Policy discourses set boundaries on how meaning is shaped, in that discourses take on their own 'internal logics', incorporating and privileging some discourses and subverting others. By opening up the problem representations to critical analysis, and teasing out the presuppositions which lodge there, it is possible to speculate upon the implications of particular discursive constructions of the problem, to see what is unproblematized in some of those constructions (1999, p. 207). The ways in which women principals, in my research are discursively constructed by official policy texts, by feminist research, by women themselves, and by boards of trustees, often in quite contradictory ways, particularly in relation to leadership roles, and managing male students, are focuses for this analysis.

Bacchi argues, as does Ball (1990), that policy sets up certain discourses at national level, but that these are picked up and adapted or rejected at local level. I have used this notion of discourse to bring together populist, official and hegemonic discourses about gender, leadership and community. This analytic approach helped to deconstruct and expose the assumptions underlying 'what the problem is (represented to be)', in terms of policy and its discursive effects around principal appointments. For example, Bacchi's approach can be applied to analysis of debates around policy issues, such as Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) legislation boards of trustees are required to adhere to; the media

representations about boys' underachievement and how these are linked to a feminised education workforce; and popular portrayals of women in leadership.

This type of analytic approach is important in the political process of challenge. Bacchi claims that policy-as-discourse analysts insist that discourses are plural and contradictory; that they are intent on revealing the ways in which discursive constructions of problems make change difficult; and that they believe exposing these constructions is a useful political exercise. The latter marks a first step in demystification and allows for discursive reconstruction (Bacchi, 2000, p. 50). In my research, the approach was useful for exposing contradictory discourses underpinning different policies and for examining how these were interpreted, adapted or rejected at the local board level. These discursive contradictions and competing constructions need to be made visible and opened up for discussion so that policy makers, women principals and board members can reconstruct alternative, socially-just solutions to discriminatory principal selection processes.

Bacchi's (2000) methodological approach requires an analysis of discourses that are relevant to the field. My analysis found that dominant discourses have emerged from New Zealand's unique policy environment which have significantly influenced board decisions around principal appointments, such as discourses of the market (including particular notions of choice and entrepreneurship) or managerialism (especially in relation to effective and masculine leadership), in ways that 'fitted' a particular 'local logic' (see Brooking 2005b). These, along with populist discourses mobilised by the media (Thomson, et al., 2003), such as underachieving boys, role models for boys, the 'crisis of masculinity' (Lingard, 2003), and contradictory discourses of gender about women and leadership, have simultaneously been called on by boards of trustees as they have made decisions about principals who were the 'best fit' for their community.

Context is also important in Bacchi's approach to analysis, because problems are often constituted differently according to location-specific and institution-specific factors. This consideration was important in my analysis of how individual schools and their board members interpreted discourses in different locations and communities. This analysis showed how "large scale social discourses are systematically (or, for that matter, unsystematically) manifest in everyday talk in local sites", something Luke claims many educational analyses have difficulty showing (Luke, 1995, p. 11). The notion I use of 'local logics' to describe the dynamics that come into play during the process of selecting a principal, demonstrates how trustees call upon sometimes conflicting and contradictory discourses when making decisions about who best fits their local community, context and location of school.

Discussion of Findings

Discourses of Gender Equity and Implications around Quality

As already indicated the most dominant discourse that emerged from my analysis of the data was that of gender equity. The official discourses of equal employment principles, human rights and gender equity were frequently acknowledged in interviews, but often quite blatantly disregarded or subverted in subsequent actions or decision making. Comments such as "we appointed the best person to the job…" or "gender didn't come into the decision…" signalled an awareness of the official discourse, but the transcripts often revealed considerable evidence of sexism, gender prejudice against women and homophobia, as well

as examples of racism, ageism and homosociability. A board chair of a small rural school with a high proportion of Maori children claimed, "Gender didn't come into it". But he then went on to contradict himself with, "Well, O.K. the discipline thing, her (the woman applicant) size and that type of thing probably would have countered against her with dealing with some of the characters we've got".

EEO Gender Balance Principle Subverted

While school boards demonstrated that they were not unaware of official EEO requirements, in the absence of monitoring or legal consequences they were prepared to openly flout the law and discriminate against target groups. Hence they were prepared to subvert the EEO principle of gender balance to their own ends if it benefited their 'local logics', with opposite results to those intended by the Act. The Act promotes the movement of women into senior positions where there is a disproportion in terms of the gender balance in the workforce. Boards have purposely misinterpreted this disproportion to mean an imbalance of males in the teaching workforce generally, and appointed them as principals to achieve more of a balance. The following comment epitomised board justification for employing male principals: "I'd be lying if I didn't say we all prayed that the best applicant was going to be male because hey, we would have been an all female school otherwise".

The gender imbalance of the teaching workforce has indeed become more pronounced as time goes on, as fewer men enter teaching each year (Brooking, Collins, Court and O'Neill, 2003; Gronn 2003). This is seen as undesirable because it is widely believed that schools should be reflecting society in terms of a balanced gender representation, but it does not follow that this disproportion should advantage men in gaining the principal position on that criterion alone.

The unofficial discourses around gender, called on by boards, often intersected with populist discourses mobilised by the media, in the justification for appointing a principal. Masculinist notions of leadership associated with authority, discipline, sporting prowess and appropriate role models for boys were often positioned against contradictory ideas about women and leadership.

Masculinist Hero Leadership

The reason for the male preference referred to most often in the interviews illustrated how populist discourses around masculinist heroic leadership related to ideas about discipline, and it appeared to be closely related to the media panic about "masculinity in crisis" (Lingard, 2003). This was most often articulated as needing a male to discipline the boys, a finding which is backed by other New Zealand research (Court, 1989), but it was also linked to team sports and outdoor education. Hero leadership is also based on a historical notion of warriorship and leading by example, where discipline is part of the militaristic discourse involving fear of authority. In the following quote, size, sexuality and maleness seem to equate with discipline here in the board's sense of logic:

> Some of the board did have "we want a man, no matter what" attitude. Discipline things he was well ahead, because of his previous experience with the Outward Bound, with these little crims. And he had size on his side. He (the successful principal) said, "You appointed me because I've got a penis and three kids". (Board chairs of small schools, Int. 15)

Discipline was also an important consideration for some boards with Pacific Island members. One of the principal advisors commented, '"Some of my Pacific Island trustees don't believe a woman can keep discipline for their Pacific Island boys. They are quite blunt and say, "we need a man to sort these boys out"' (Principal Adviser, Int. 8).

There was an assumption by many boards that women are incapable of disciplining, in spite of the fact that in most New Zealand primary schools it is women who are responsible for discipline. Behaviour management is usually tagged to the Deputy or Associate Principal position, and in 2002 women comprised 80 percent of these positions. Contradicting the dominant view of the boards on discipline were comments from the women principals, none of whom considered they had a problem with discipline. Most of them had had years of experience being in charge of school-wide behaviour and discipline, as part of their job description as deputy or associate principals. Understanding and recognition of this prior experience appeared to be invisible to most of the boards interviewed.

Role Models for Boys

Within recent years there has been another populist discourse increasingly reported in the media and provoking moral panic, which has been taken up by boards, which links "feminised schooling" and "failing boys". This has resulted in boards appointing male role models as the solution to the "problem of the boys" (see Smith, 1999). Large numbers of boards made mention of "failing boys", "naughty boys" or "fatherless boys" as a reason to appoint a male principal. Board chairs from small schools used the following logic frequently, "We know that we need males in schools to give role models and stuff like that for the boys, so if you had a female and male with the same sort of skills and qualities, you would have chosen the male". One chair with a male principal clarified the need for: "more the father figure. Like there's split families and no Dad at home and the kids run riot over Mum sort of thing – single parent families".

There is an ongoing silence in society about the responsibilities of the fathers who have abandoned these boys, and instead blame for the single mothers and women teachers who are left to deal with the problem. Boards in the interviews identified male principals as the solution to the problem of the "poor boys", and the distinction between schools providing father figures for fatherless boys rather than competent teachers for all children, appeared not to have dawned on some boards. Unfortunately, implicit in this solution is the conflation of teaching and parenting/fathering (Smith, 1999), the silencing of the particular needs of the fatherless boys and the flawed assumption that any male teacher will do, without looking at the particular qualities the male applicant brings. A further argument which appears to have escaped the public's notice, is that males have historically continued to dominate as role models in the principalship and yet this appears to have had little impact on the "problem of the boys".

Sports Hero

Along with the male role model preference there was evidence in the transcripts of the privileging of team-sports and outdoor-education in gendered ways by boards. Some board members talked about the importance of the principal having an interest and ability to encourage and coach team sports, by which they appeared to mean boys' sports, as girls' sports were never mentioned. The media privileges male team sports, and this discourse is linked to hegemonic masculinity (Skelton, 1996) and a gendered construct of discipline.

National male sporting heroes frequently arise from the 'failing boys' camp in schools in New Zealand, so sport is seen to be important as one area where these boys can achieve success. Unsurprisingly then, some boards rated male teachers and principals highly for their interest and aptitude in team sports. A board chair justified the appointment of a male principal on the logic that:

> We'd had female teachers and we identified that we were lacking in the sports side of things. The physical education type of thing. The kids were out on the tennis court doing exercises every morning. That was good, but they wanted to play the team sports thing and that wasn't happening. So the male brought in the team sports (Board chairs of small schools, Int. 15).

Associated with these sporting activities are outdoor-education pursuits, including white-water rafting, abseiling, and caving. This was seen by board members as a male prerogative. The literature also endorses that more men than women have been found to experience success in outdoor education courses (Sharp, 2001). One advisor spoke about the number of times in selection meetings he had listened to women board members reflecting on their own exciting outdoor-education experiences which had been led by male teachers at primary school, and who now wanted their own children to experience similar activities.

Women and Leadership

Populist discourses of women and leadership were drawn on by boards to justify appointment decisions, sometimes in contention with official discourses of equity as legislated in the Human Rights Act. One such was socio-biological discourses about motherhood where the qualities of motherhood were positioned as either positive or negative to the role of the principalship, according to the particular 'local logics' of the board.

On the one hand a woman's so-called 'natural' ability to nurture and multi-task are seen in a favourable light in terms of leadership, as one board chair said: "I think that the women, who are the mothers, are able to handle the pressure of school and parenthood much better than males, while doing ten things at once". On the other hand however, the same nurturing facility is cast in a detrimental light according to another chair who maintained that, '"a woman can decide this year that no, she doesn't even want any children, but in two years time that could be a totally different decision…and if they have children already, I think a father can much easier say, "O.K. my child is sick, but I need to go to work", whereas a mum feels really guilty"'.

These contradictory logics about ideas of motherhood and leadership raise problems for aspiring women principals because it is impossible to predict which way a board will view them. A principal advisor related the story of a very close contest for a principal's position between two women, one of whom was single and one of whom had a family. The position was won finally by the woman who was a mother, even though, as she reported:

> They were equal in every way and you couldn't possibly fault either of them. I mean they both would portray the right image, they both had all the credibility in every way that you could possibly think of. In the end they said, "Look she hasn't had children herself, this woman has, and that makes a difference. She knows what it's like to be mother" (Principal Adviser, Int. 8). It is difficult to imagine that the applicants' parenting status would ever have been an issue in this way if this decision

had been between two male applicants to the principalship. It is also illegal under the Human Rights Act to discriminate on the grounds of family status.

Preparation for the position of principalship has often meant women have not applied for their first job until their late 40s or early 50s. In a study of primary head teachers in Britain, Hill (1994) found the average age of attaining their first primary headship for women is 40-49 years, and 35-39 for men. The discrepancy was explained by career breaks. The women principals in my study validated this and spoke about taking longer than their male colleagues to reach the point of applying for their first principalship. They talked about broken service for family reasons, spending longer in the classroom gaining teaching experience, spending longer in senior management jobs and taking time to study and qualify themselves for the principalship before applying. This too is verified in the British literature where in spite of men and women not expressing dramatically different career aspirations (Hill 1994), men were promoted more quickly, and on average, did not have more years of teaching experience (Davidson 1985).

Most of the women principals in my study were older than the average age of parents and board members at their schools. The woman in the following dialogue had spent over twenty years gaining experience in primary, intermediate and secondary schools, had taught for four years in the private system and had senior management roles before she felt she was ready to apply for her first principalship:

> So I've had quite a good look around at systems and decided I've looked at all the different styles of leadership and thought, "Yeah I know one day I can get there". But I'd also made a conscious decision really that I was also going to look at my own family as well. I've got a child in the fourth form and I decided that to be fair to him, even though a senior management role was busy, that I still wasn't going to put myself up into the next job until he started high school. I'm really glad that I didn't because last year, I reflect back and think "crikey how much time did I?" – I mean don't get me wrong, I'm not a bad mum and I go to his sport and I'm still involved in all those thing, but I do know that I haven't seen as much of him and that's worried me a little (Woman principal of small school: Int. 6, p. 31).

Family commitments expressed here mirror the literature on double and triple roles (Acker 1994), which account for why many women are older when they apply for their first leadership position. Ninety percent of the women I interviewed by phone suspected ageism had been a factor in them missing out on principal's jobs at some stage in their career. Several spoke about missing out on jobs only to find later that a younger, much less experienced, less qualified male had been appointed instead.

Ageism

Several of the women principals interviewed spoke of the worryingly high number of very young inexperienced male teachers who had just won their first principal's job:

> Woman 1 – Well I tell you what was also quite interesting is just being up in Auckland at that First Time Principals' Training and meeting the very varied group of people who were first time principals. One of the guys was a beginning teacher.

> Woman 2 – Astounding, but I was reading something on Leadspace (Ministry of Education website for principals) the other day and some guy introduced himself and he was a third-year teacher! (Women principals of small schools: Int.6).

This observation was backed up by a male principal from a large school:

> Well I visited a school at one stage where the principal was a beginning teacher and wasn't even provisionally registered…and it was a two teacher school (Male principal of large school: Int. 20).

One finding from the literature which backs up these comments is the homosocial effects around age. Notman (1997) noticed a tendency for school boards in New Zealand to appoint people of a similar age to themselves, because they shared similar experiences. Considering the average age of most parents of primary school aged children, it was not surprising to find this preference for younger principals in my transcripts. This trend was also commented on by the principal Advisers:

> One of my issues of concern is the age and gender composition of boards generally, when you are working with primary schools. If you have got children at primary school, they (the board members) are pretty much inclined to be in a particular age bracket, perhaps late 30's early 40's; more so than there used to be before Tomorrow's Schools first started. So perhaps you think that people in their 50's are quite old compared to you. So they are going to think that if someone has been in a job for twenty-three years, they are going to see that as a negative. I can tell you that because they have voiced that (Principal Adviser: Int. 2).

This trend hints of ageist appointment practices, which when combined with the sexist practices documented, has very concerning implications for the future quality of the principalship in New Zealand. The largest group in the primary teaching workforce, which will be the group most prepared in terms of quality to succeed the present group preparing to retire, is the senior management group, 80 percent of whom are women. Considering the number of years they will have spent in reaching these senior management positions, it is unlikely that the majority will still be in their mid 30s.

Conclusion

New Zealand's unregulated environment around principal appointments, which allows criteria such as previous experience, qualifications and suitability for the principal position to sometimes take second place to the gender of the applicant, does not guarantee quality people in the role.

A principal adviser, who also works at a University with responsibility to support new principals, commented on the consequences of some appointments where gender over-rides professional merit:

> We spend thousands of dollars propping up males in leadership positions in primary schools; principals who should not have got the position in the first place in terms of their level of competency. They were not even competent classroom teachers because we've tracked some of them. They came into those positions in hurried appointments,

very hurried appointments boards made, so we've got a male teacher in January. They wanted a male. (Principal Adviser, Int. 38).

This is endorsed by the draft OECD report on school leaders in New Zealand which claims:

> There is strong evidence that a significant proportion of new primary principals lack prior management experience and that this may impact on the performance of their school.

> A recent Ministry of Education analysis suggested that about 8% of all schools require either formal or informal support from a regional or local Ministry office in any year, and of these schools in 2005, 51% have had one or more new principal(s) since 2002. 72% of these new principals had no prior experience as a deputy principal (Ministry of Education 2006a, point 215, p. 49).

It would appear timely that the potential leadership capacity of a large proportion of untapped talent in New Zealand was realised. Legislation may prove to be the only way forward of accessing that talent. The prior credentialing and registering of aspiring principals could be a possible way forward. Boards would still retain their self-managing powers of choosing their own applicant, but only from within this professionally recognised and registered pool of aspiring principals.

The credentialing process would need to be developed in consultation with women leaders and aspiring leaders to ensure their needs would be met, as they represent the largest pool of potential leaders. An approach such as this may then help provide one solution toward ensuring improved quality and supply of our future school leaders.

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¡ In Maoridom, mana is the acquired status or rank of chief Maori culture.

iiLeadspace is the Ministry created website for the first time principals to use to share experiences with each other. All these principals have been leased a laptop for the purpose.

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