

Redesigning Schools & Leadership

Exciting opportunities and entrenched barriers for women

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Leadership has now replaced administration and management in the lexicon of school reform. Education policy in Australia, as in the UK, USA, NZ, Canada and Europe has, during the past decades, focused on leadership as the means by which radical and ongoing school reform is to be implemented (Blackmore and Sachs, 2006). The focus in the 1990s was largely on restructuring in the form of self-managing schools. The failure of restructuring to improve student learning, and indeed the exacerbation of differences between schools and students in terms of educational outcomes, led researchers to reconsider the form and nature of schooling and educational leadership and its relationship to student learning (Teese and Polesel, 2003). Furthermore, the focus of policymakers on principals did not reflect the research indicating that it was teachers that made the greatest difference in terms of student learning. Principals play a facilitative role in terms of developing whole-school approaches, encouraging co-ordination, nurturing professional renewal, and creating safe and secure conditions conducive to good teaching and learning (Hallinger and Heck, 1996). Systems now seek to build leadership capacity amongst teachers as well as principals (eg. DE&T *Blueprint*, 2003).

Finally, schools are also under significant pressures – to

respond to culturally diverse and more mobile student populations, the changing social relations of gender, 'race' and class, a now precarious work order for all workers, and an increased awareness of the importance of location and individual's health/well-being, as well as education in framing an individual's educational and life opportunities (Lamb et al., 2004). As a consequence of choice-driven policies, many parents now actively choose which school their child will attend for a range of reasons, often more about religion, gender, culture, language and class than education. There is increasing disparity between rich and poor schools on the basis of health, wealth, employment and well-being (Vinson, 2004). There are also increased expectations placed on schools for the constant improvement of all students as measured up against standardised educational outcomes. These expectations are externally imposed – by governments seeking to meet (and beat) national and international standards eg. PISA, TIMMS, but also through parental anxiety about student access to higher education and employment in riskier environments.

Therefore, it has been argued that there is a need to rethink how schools relate to their communities, local and global. The aim is to produce new learner identities to create a culture of lifelong learning (Hargreaves, 2003). This means providing multiple modes of participation in a range of academic, vocational and personal curricula. At the same time, the nature of what constitutes 'school' knowledge as embedded in the formal curriculum is being re-viewed. The assumption underpinning recent curriculum reform since 2000 in most Australian states (eg. *New Basics* in Queensland, *Essential Learning* in Tasmania, *South Australia Curriculum Studies*, *Victorian Essential Learning Standards*) is about what counts as 'essential' for all students and where and when choice should be encouraged to address individualised differences and needs. Common to all are notions of individualised learning, 'essential' generic and specialist skills, social development and the development of multiple capacities (mental, emotional, physical) as well as multi-literacies (ACDE, 2001). In order to undertake this work, schools are now expected to link to workplaces and community, provide multiple programs in vocational and academic education appropriate to the specific and often different needs of the early years, middle years and post-compulsory levels.

Such trends put a substantive onus onto principals and teachers to be forward-thinking and be able to initiate and manage organisational and pedagogical reform (OECD, 2001; d'Arbon et al., 2001). New types of leadership are required with the capacity to manage complex institutional arrangements and relationships to build more community-based, globally-oriented learning communities, professional learning networks, and university and/or industry partnerships.

What is paradoxical is that at a time when there are greater challenges and opportunities for school leadership, governments are aware of a decline of interest in school leadership and indeed a declining supply and retention rate of teachers generally (DE&T, 2003; NAESP, 1998; Williams, 2003). This declining supply does not merely arise out of the ageing demographic profile of the teaching workforce with a large cohort of teachers and principals now into retirement (Preston, 2002), but also a well-documented set of related issues about the changing nature of teaching as a profession and the principalship in particular. The principal's job has become too unmanageable, overwhelming, stressful, and indeed a health risk (DE&T, 2004). Principals consider that there is too great a focus on management and not leadership (Blackmore et al., 2003). Principals (as indeed teachers) felt 'disengaged' from their work because of the increased demand created by the new technologies of performativity (ie. image management, cutting costs and being seen to act), whilst the conditions of their work had led to disempowerment, overload, anxiety about tenure, de-professionalisation and reduced autonomy with increased demands of markets and managerial accountability (Blackmore and Sachs, 2006; Gronn and Sinnae, 2004). Many women aspirants realistically see the job as still a largely masculine domain in that the time demands leave little for family and other responsibilities, and the overall 'system' still favours male applicants despite the gradual increase of women in the principalship over the past decades (Blackmore, 1999; Lacey, 2002).

Studies of the demand and supply of teachers and principals (d'Arbon et al., 2001; Lacey, 2002; Pritchard, 2003) and our own research (Blackmore et al., in press) have identified two issues of particular concern on which I will now focus – that of selection, and that of the changing nature of the principalship. Each has gendered implications.



Principal selection as homosocial reproduction

We distilled from our evidence five major 'supply' concerns: that the selection process was seen to be unpredictable, the quality of leadership that emerged was variable, that it was dependent on principals on the panels, concerns about the capabilities of principals to meet these demands, and how the latter fuel expanding principal professional development programs. What is ignored was that principal selection is now intimately connected with a range of factors about how the job is perceived – by systems, by parents and by aspirants. This was articulated by various subsections of school systems, principal associations and teacher unions and featured in research on school leadership, including our own. The job itself had changed with choice-based schooling – much of it was about image management and the principal's identity was equated to that of the school (Thomson, 2004). Principals in self-managing schools were burdened with the financial risk, increasingly devolved down to schools together with zoning and funding arrangements based on student enrolments. As financial managers, their only flexibility was reliant upon managing the tension between tenured senior staff and inexperienced casual teachers, between programs focusing on the basics and/or remediation and extracurricula liberal arts/sports programs, or between academic and vocational programs. School 'success and failure' has become more closely related to community perceptions and media representations, as well as the principalship (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Blackmore & Thomson, 2004; Thomson, Blackmore, Sachs & Tregenza, 2003).

In this context, principal selection is meant to produce high-performing 'winners'. Yet the criteria for judging this are highly debatable. For example, men are seen to be more likely to be chosen to head up high-performing middle class schools that were in the market game, while women tended to opt for the more 'difficult' schools in areas which had greater cultural diversity and socio-economic and health issues. This was because they were more likely to be successful, but also because for many it was a social justice issue. Two studies, one of New Zealand principal selection processes (Brooking, Collins, Court & O'Neill, 2003), and the other of leading and managing

Australian schools (Blackmore & Sachs, 2006), confirm that, in the context of marketised education, gender interplays with locality. Conservatism is evident in rural communities but also in the more traditional academic/elite school communities, where masculinity was linked to entrepreneurialism and informed most recently by discourses about 'masculinity in crisis' and 'feminised' schools (Mills & Lingard, 2004). Interestingly, women were more likely to be selected in more culturally diverse (and often more disadvantaged) communities, because of their commitment to social justice.

Second, selection and promotion procedures are sites of contest between change and continuity. These are uncertain times for schools and students. How risk is understood and acted upon in particular contexts, varies. Some communities and individuals deal well with ambiguity, change, risk and uncertainty; others fall back into positions of comfort and safety by selecting the familiar (Boler, 1999; Evans, 1996). In the context of increased uncertainty and ongoing and often imposed rapid change, some parents and teachers crave the security of continuity in what they know when selecting the principal – most often a male, eg. in rural communities where networks were largely sport related; or an applicant who was familiar with the community – most often the incumbent Acting Principal. Women tended to get the job if they had been Acting Principals because perceptions had to come face to face with reality about the capacity of women as leaders.

And third, concerns for equity and diversity in the job have been quietened. While many individuals in education systems can 'rationally' accept the evidence, as presented in Merit and Equity training in selection for example, that women are structurally and culturally disadvantaged over time, this knowledge does not necessarily lead to socially-just actions in specific contexts eg. local selection panels. Gender equity often means challenging gender identity, and equity policies can be very confronting to different modes of masculinity and femininity. Women in leadership deal not only with the fear of the feminine that characterises particular masculinities, but also must face those 'emphasised femininities' that have greater investment in traditional gender roles. Gender is also inflected in education markets, and images of what constitutes an effective entrepreneurial or strong

leader (Blackmore, 1996). The ways in which diversity and equity are enhanced or marginalised by selection are largely off the policy agenda.

When diversity and equity are addressed it is often done unreflexively, drawing on limited 'gender balance' arguments eg. if there is a female principal, this must be 'balanced' by a male deputy and vice versa, although all-male leadership teams are not questioned in the same way as all-female leadership teams. Or there is a view that there is a need to alternate male/female with each successive appointment, thus often ignoring merit, and not challenging when there are successive male principals (Alvesson & Du Billing, 2003). This is a novel appropriation of feminist claims to be better represented in leadership to represent women proportionally. But this representational claim is itself problematic if women are inducted into a mode of leadership that is not reconstructed in ways that are inclusive of diversity and difference ie. you are a presence but not with a significant voice to enact change (Bacchi, 1999; Blackmore, 2006).

In particular, we found certain selection practices raised concerns – the dependence of selection panels on a written application, where some had more skill at writing in the narrow form required. Some panels also had difficulties reading applications, often rejecting a more discursive or academic approach of applicants who had done postgraduate courses (women being greater consumers than men of professional development). Then there was the dilemma of experience versus potential, where those with immediate school experience were favoured over those with other forms of experience in the workplace. Again, men were more likely than women to have had leadership experience at the top. Evidence indicated there was in many instances a covert rule about the appointment of preferred applicants (either acting in the position or favoured by the more influential members of the panel such as local superintendents or principals) ie. networking amongst an often male dominated group.

All of this was in the context of local selection panels where the level of experience in selection procedures was often limited, and where biases went unchecked.

Some panels were strongly anti-intellectual. There was an assumption that theory was antithetical to practice. Often the evidence of inconsistency of decisions where the criteria were not met or was relatively arbitrary due to the composition of the panel – a lottery as one principal called it. Finally, the job description of the principalship to which all applicants write was itself seen to be a 'put off', with leadership in curriculum and social relationships low in the list of priorities.

The selection process for the principalship is thus the cumulation of numerous competing aspects of identity work for applicants and for schools. Selection simultaneously combines making a collective investment for the future, a desire to appoint well for the school and the students, and a fear of the unknown. It is therefore highly emotional work. It is symbolic and performative work, because the principal is identifiable with the school. It also challenges individual and group notions of what is 'normal', and in particular summons up in some communities and individuals strong resistance to diversity and difference – this can be on the basis of gender, race, culture etc. Those with too much humour or an overt desire to innovate, or who were seen to be different, were considered to be too risky. Panels chose principals to fit current school needs and not future challenges. There was a strong preference for appointing individuals who were 'like us': a form of homosocial reproduction.

The above raises significant challenges for systems seeking to improve. Some of the strategies suggested have been succession planning, identifying and developing leadership early and encouraging teacher leadership and peer coaching. There is an increased focus on distributed leadership in which teachers are now encouraged to see and act as leaders within schools. But this does not necessarily change, and indeed could exacerbate, the above characteristics of principal selection. If schools are going to be able to meet the challenges of the future we argue that the principal's job, and the selection process, as well as how schools are organised, and the social practices arising, have to be more radically redesigned to both attract a wider and more diverse range of leaders (Thomson and Blackmore, 2006).



Redesigning leadership

A key factor that indicated the *lack* of interest in school leadership in all studies was the rapidly changing nature of the job. Most saw the work of the principalship as having grown incrementally, with self-managing schools in more devolved and marketised systems, shifting towards doing more administrative and image management work. Ironically this occurred at the very moment when schools were expected to focus on the core work of teaching and learning, individualised learning, plus ongoing professional learning for teachers and principals. So while the language of reform was that of leadership, it was narrowly constrained within managerial boundaries.

As have numerous others (Mulford, 2003), our study indicates aspects of the principal's job in need of change: the hours of work and intensified accountability regimes; the focus on risk; financial and property management, not interpersonal relationships; the push for unrealistic performances regardless of circumstances of school; the imbalance between work/family life, where family life is ignored; the emotional toil of managing schools and systems in crisis; the constant multiple and competing demands arising from top-down imposed reform; and the expectation to be equally responsive to local contingencies (Lacey, 2002). What becomes apparent is that many do not aspire to do this stressful job at a time when there are more lucrative alternatives (Pounder et al., 2003). Women in particular have been the cheap and flexible resource for expanding school systems during the 20th century. In the 21st century female teacher graduates, and now more male graduates, have a range of job pathways offering better work/family balance, better career advancement, superior mentoring and pay than teaching and the principalship. Lifestyle issues are factored in more than ever before for both sexes. These issues put greater pressure on the need to redesign school leadership to make it more attractive and fulfilling.

Furthermore, the organisation of schooling is itself changing in ways that require different leadership approaches, as schools assume innovative institutional formations linking into communities and workplaces

and between each other. There has been significant structural redesign underway in the form of multi-campus schools, work/school or school/university partnerships, senior/junior/middle schools, and mini-schools within schools. These structural reforms and increased pressures on schools as central to community capacity building and joined up governance, suggest that the notion of the 'power of one' (ie. the principal) is limited within networked learning communities (Thomson and Blackmore, 2006, in press).



Redesigning schools and leadership

Out of some of these institutional redesigns have emerged different ways of structuring the principalship: co-principalship, distributed pedagogical leadership, shared principalship, multi-campus principalship, and community-based principalship (Thomson and Blackmore, 2004; Court, 2003, 2004; Gronn, 2003). Again, women principals in New Zealand were more likely than men to have taken up opportunities for co-principalship (Court, 2004). Network relations mean that many teachers exercise and undertake positional *and* informal leadership. Court (2004) refers to the continuum of leadership: sole leadership, supported leadership (patron), dual leadership (equal partnership) and shared leadership amongst groups and individuals. Her analysis makes us consider the possible range of different structures and decision-making processes that are currently being used. Court's analysis of how these innovative models have worked, as did ours, highlight the importance of system-wide support and a cultural ethos that nurtures democratic approaches to educational governance if such innovations are to be sustained.

Pat Thomson and I (in press) have argued that the focus needs to be redirected towards redesigning schools for improved student learning, before redesigning leadership. We see redesign in our conceptual framework of a number of case studies we have undertaken as both a process and a product. Redesign works with the available resources and knowledge, and that it is not 'all new' but builds on enhances, re-forms, incorporates old practices. All redesigns are therefore hybrids. What we found was when schools decided to 'redesign' themselves to

meet new challenges – both local and global – there was need for a shared warrant for particular types of design, a collective or individual recognition and problematisation of the need to re-design. But this also required the capacity to develop infrastructure to support and shape the redesign, a major role for principals. This meant those leading the redesign attend to what we referred to as *redesign modalities* – how to deal with *spatial practices* of architectural and community space, the *temporal practices* in terms of time allocated to research, reflection, planning and dialogue, the *cultural practices* in which leaders pay attention to the symbolic, undertake identity work by recognising expertise and experience.

Nor can structural practices be ignored. *Structural practices* range from minimal structures, looser coupling and more networking on a contingent basis, both within the organisation and externally, to more multilayered structures or more concentrated, hierarchical and tighter structures. How does this encourage/discourage more democratic processes? Underpinning all good leadership and change management are *communication practices* which we found need to focus on knowledge production and dissemination, processes of exchange, sharing experience, ideas, and accessibility. If schools in redesigning focus on cost efficiencies and/or survival, communication can become more succinct and top down. When democratic deliberation was central then communication tended to be shared on the grounds of ownership.

We understood, as did our participants, that *leadership is a social practice and a collective endeavour*, an aspect that tends to be ignored in current principal position descriptions. Our investigation confirms the centrality of relationships to any redesign project. Indeed, we suspect that any redesign which fosters collaborative and productive relationships impacting on learning, may well be the key normative benchmark. Finally, redesigners need to consider the *Semiotic practices*: the language mobilised by whom and how. These are the redesign modalities that need to be *choreographed* by leaders.

The success of the redesign was dependent on the extent to which it brought together the philosophy of school and community life. This is not new in the

effective schools and school improvement literature, but the links and support between community and school are critical. At the same time, we know some schools, by virtue of their governance, history, resources or political imperative, are better positioned than others to develop these kind of powerful problematisations, infrastructures and relationships. Some schools do face severe limitations to the degree of philosophical coherence they can achieve, by virtue of their location, levels of local competition, and local histories of dispute (Thomson, 2002). We know that there are between-school differences that make a difference to the capacity and capability of educators and community members alike to redesign.

We also found that those schools that focused firstly on the question of principals' work, and then considered effects flowing from the changes in leadership, were much more limited in their effects than those schools that focused on student learning and then asked "What does this mean for the leadership practices in this school?" The more successful redesigns looked at the whole, and the redesign of principals' work was an integral part of a larger enterprise. Consequently, the work of leading and managing became both process/product and leader/follower of change.

Attempts to redesign schooling on a large scale can also be easily thwarted when there is no coherent and meaningful ethical and political (spiritual and moral perhaps) purpose. For example, the Brigidine order in Australia has actively promoted democratic models of school decision-making in the form of co-principalships. It is premised upon the notion of schools as democratic places. This principle was articulated throughout the school's decision-making processes and leadership representations ie. the male and female principal both spoke at all functions, took up issues as they arose without a strict division of labour, took equal legal responsibility etc. Their shared office space was symbolically equal. Gender became a factor in terms of how parents and students related to them, and not how they related to each other or the job, or how they represented themselves and what they did. So to redesign the principalship there is significant educational work that has to be done in communities, as gender is more about how female leaders are represented rather than what they do.

What was apparent in all of our cases was that any redesign was also shaped by systemic cultures, values and dispositions. Therefore, the Brigidine order had a system-wide philosophy of democratic decision-making. This is important, given the current popularity in the leadership literature and increasingly in policies, of distributed leadership. This is a notion that is very seductive for many women teachers and leaders, as it would appear to facilitate and support them transferring collegial practices into formal leadership positions. But the context in which the notion of distributive leadership is being mobilised is that of corporate schooling in market-oriented systems. That is, the broader value system of school governance is not democratic but market driven in a highly individualised way that does make reference to the public good.

Distributive leadership in reality can often also mean the redistribution of managerial tasks but not of power or resources. So despite good intentions, systemic structures, values, and dispositions constrain and shape leadership practices in individual schools, particularly where the financial and accountability mechanisms are tight. So teachers share the risk and responsibility of leadership but under conditions of reduced professional autonomy. At the same time, schools that do focus on redesign to improve student learning tend to produce flatter, less hierarchical relationships as teacher and student teams or mini-schools become the basis of organisation. Greater responsibility is imparted to team leaders who are teachers, who actively produce curriculum, organise and create collegial learning environments, and to students. In these instances, the focus is often on pedagogy and an inclusive and supportive culture for

both students and staff, where younger teachers are encouraged to undertake leadership roles in mentoring arrangements.

What this means with regard to the selection and changing the nature of job of the principal is therefore significant. Selection needs to be less about homosocial reproduction in finding someone who will fit the school, and more about finding someone who has a sense of the future(s) and the capacity to support and facilitate more loosely coupled educational arrangements. This is about systems taking risks in selection and setting up new ways of doing it – for example, beyond an interview, getting aspirant eligible principals to spend time in a school, to talk with, and be seen by, students, parents and teachers. Thus the practices of school leadership are made evident to the stakeholders, as are the social relationships. It means systems facilitating multiple representations of leadership and diversifying approaches to leadership. It requires improved understanding about how leadership, as a set of social practices and relationships, is undertaken by many – but under different conditions (eg. resources, authority). It also means not only employing more women as leaders, but also promoting wider cultural and ethnic diversity in school leadership, to challenge the dominance of 'whiteness' as well as 'masculinity' in representations of leadership (Blackmore, 2006). Diversifying the representations of leadership are as important as changing the practices of leadership (Reay & Ball, 2000).

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