

## WOMEN PRINCIPALS: A DELPHI STUDY

Kennece Coombe, John Retallick, Barry Cocklin, Susan Clancy  
School of Education  
Charles Sturt University-Riverina  
Wagga

A paper presented at the Joint Conference of the Australian

Association for Research in Education and the New Zealand  
Association for Research in Education held at Deakin University,  
November, 1992

-----  
Coombe, Retallick, Cocklin, Clancy p.

Women Principals: A Delphi Study

#### ABSTRACT

A review of the literature examining the nature and process of women in educational administration suggests a qualitatively differentiated approach based upon gender. In order to explore this context and parameters further, a Delphi study has been instigated to focus upon a group of women in positions of educational administration, the initial outcomes of which are discussed in this paper. The research has sought to elaborate the ways in which women Principals in rural New South Wales perceive, conceptualise, and enact educational leadership and school management.

#### Introduction:

This paper reports on a research project in progress therefore the results discussed here are still tentative and refer to the responses of the first round of the study only. Nevertheless, the intention inherent in the presentation of the findings at this time is to provide some indicators of the ways in which women principals in rural New South Wales schools approach their jobs as educational administrators.

Literature in the field (see Coombe et al, 1992) has indicated that women in administrative positions approach their work responsibilities in ways quite different from their male colleagues. The present project aimed to build upon the extant literature base by focusing on the lived realities of the principals - that is taking cognisance only of what they perceived to be the important aspects of their job.

The study employed a Delphi technique which is a research methodology based on eliciting information in survey form. The technique employs a feed-back of responses procedure as a means of generating consensus.

The historical context for the study was a period where a great deal of change had been occurring within the school sector of New South Wales education during the preceding few years. Examples of this change were the retrenchment of 2,000 teacher positions and a rapid devolution of responsibility from the bureaucratic centre to the regions, clusters and schools.

The immediate time frame for the study was during fourth term - towards the end of the school year. This time period suited the purpose of the research in that the principals were able to reflect on the year just gone in terms of what they had achieved and the expectations (viable, valid or otherwise) held for them by the community, the Department, themselves, their workmates and others.

A flip-side to this timing however, was that October-November is a period where teachers in whatever size school are busy so responses were not

quickly returned. Nevertheless, the timing appeared not to diminish the amount of time or consideration given to the issues addressed by the principals who responded but may have contributed to the 'mortality rate' in the first round.

Some brief statistical data:

The original intention of the study was to survey about thirty women principals from the Western and Riverina regions of the Department of School Education in New South Wales. The selection of these regions for study was predicated on the fundamentally rural nature of these two regions which, coincidentally, form the major catchment area for Charles Sturt University.

An initial invitation to participate in the study was forwarded to 101 schools (42 in the Riverina and 59 in Western Region). Sixty-three principals responded that they would like to participate in the study (22 in the Riverina and 41 in Western Region). One replied that she did not wish to participate. Thus the focus question was sent to those principals who had indicated their interest. Of these, 39 principals (16 Riverina and 23 Western region) returned first round responses. For the first round then, both of the regions had a 38% response rate from the total available population.

As a focus for the first round the following was posed to the principals:

Please write one page about what you believe to be the most important aspects of your job as a school principal. For example, you may begin by

considering the various components of what you do in terms of administration, academic leadership and teaching and these may prompt you to think of other aspects.

The intention was the principals should feel free to respond in whichever way they chose. Predictably, many chose to arrange their responses along the lines implied in the focus statement. As a result of this perhaps, the responses from the principals tended to fall into broad categorisations such as primary concerns; administration; teaching; leadership; welfare; and one of general concerns. Each of these will be developed in the remainder of the paper. Again, at this point, it should be stressed that a sample of essentially raw data, in terms of the expectations of the Delphi, is being presented here. These are the initial comments of the Principals. They have not yet been "fed back" in order to move towards consensus of which elements are most important, take most time, are most satisfying and so on.

#### Primary Concerns:

Many of the principals made their opening statement in their response an indication of what they saw as the first priority, their primary concern or what they believed to be the most important aspect of their role.

It seemed that the principals from the smaller schools particularly considered the education and welfare of the children in their class as being their first responsibility. In later

parts of these responses, the principals indicated that part of this responsibility was to reduce isolation for the children in their care:

The most important aspect of my job as principal ... is that of being a teacher. I find most of my time is spent programming and preparing for lessons for the children in my care.

I still see the teaching of the children as the most important component and certainly the one I enjoy the most, but the other administrative duties are taking more and more time after school and at the weekends.

As a teaching principal, my first commitment must be to the children in my class.

First and foremost, I am a teacher.

Welfare and education of the children.

Student welfare receives top priority.

For others of the principals, issues to do with credibility were of concern in areas where retention of teaching staff was a problem:

The single most important aspect of my role as School Principal has been the establishing of my credibility. This school has had five principals in the four years before my appointment. Added to this circumstance was the perception by some (many?) in the system that women were gaining promotion via gender rather than merit.

This, the first year of my principalship, has focussed on building harmonious relationships, building trust and building credibility. A great deal of energy has been directed towards healing previous divisions and modelling a calm, reasonable and pleasant approach. ... Whilst administrative aspects of the role are very time-consuming and it is important to ensure that they are efficiently conducted, in the long term they are not what I consider the most important aspects. For the purposes of establishing credibility, however, one needs to be seen as an effective administrator.

The difference between management and leadership in the school context was made explicit in the comments of the principals. Those who saw their role as primarily managerial commented in the following way:

Primarily, I am a manager, managing all aspects of the school whether it be administrative, in one area of the curriculum or when dealing with the community and students.

The most important aspects of my job as a principal of a small one teacher school are not only the developing of the school's long term goals, in management and educational outcomes for students but sole responsibility that these goals are

realised.

On the other hand, those principals who considered leadership to be of greatest concern said:

The principal must have a clear vision of the major outcomes to be achieved by the school and, basically, where the school is going.

I believe that the most important aspect of my job as school principal is my leadership role. This means that my role modelling, my philosophy are tasks that I do, the things that I say must all be philosophically sound because my position is very visible and people all watch to read the cues. I try to administer, lead and teach in an empowering way.

I believe that I have a great opportunity and privilege to inspire and motivate pupils, staff, parents and community to work together as a team to achieve our common objective of providing the best possible education for our pupils.

Others were more all-encompassing in their responses:

The single most important aspect is Relationships!! - managing people - this comes into each of the categories of Administration, Academic Leadership and Teaching.

Time, balance and a realistic attitude.

As a principal of a PP6, there really is no such thing as 'important aspects' because the bottom line is that everything is important and you're the one that has to do virtually everything. If anything is more important, it is flexibility and independence. How else can you do everything from plumbing to groundwork to accounting to teaching to management?

Once the principals had commented on what they saw as their primary role, they went on to expand their perceptions of what they did in their job more fully. As indicated earlier, these comments tended to fall fairly easily into some broad and basic categories which will be elaborated here.

## Administration:

The aspect of administration, along with "teaching" seemed to draw the most attention from the principals. In terms of what they saw as the elements which comprised administration, it seemed that the notion of administration was either fairly idiosyncratic or that

certain features of administration demanded more time and attention than others. Issues most often addressed were those relating to the demands of outside forces or non-teaching facets of the role:

Administration (finance, staff and pupil returns, orders, mail, correspondence, budgeting, public relations)

Meeting guidelines and requirements of Dept of School Education, School Council etc.

Ensuring implementation of Departmental aims and objectives

Communication with Regional office, Cluster Director and other agencies

Marketing the school and public education

Public relations - parents, community, Dept officers, being accessible

Dealing with: fulltime staff, release teacher, clerical assistant, general assistant, councillors and visitors, P&C Association, School Council, Parent workshops, Home tutor workshops

School maintenance - internal, external, groundwork, public access, drainage, repairs, safety, gardens and garbage.

Financial management - ensuring resources are tied to educational goals

Program budget

Parent involvement - work with parent bodies; raise parents' expectations, educational awareness through appropriate programs/activities

Responsible and available for - school committees,

cluster committees, meetings,

Writing submissions

On the other hand some responses referred to dealing with staff in order to promote the well-being of staff and students:

Involving staff in decision making

Facilitating channels of communication between all members of the school community - negotiation, mediation and information dissemination as appropriate

Teaching:

As with the earlier responses which indicated that principals attributed significant primacy to their continuing role as

"teacher", many also indicated that teaching remained an essential part of their position as principal - whether or not they were in a teaching principal position:

Being able to demonstrate that I'm a very good practitioner (eg taking a small teaching load)

supporting effective teaching practice and encouraging innovative teaching

Ensuring that the students have access to a broad range of educational experiences

Prepare programs and teach students at the same time as undertaking all other functions of principal.

Educational/classroom learning needs of the children.

Leadership:

Separate from their roles as teacher or administrator, the principals also perceived that they had a deal of responsibility in terms of professional leadership. Some mentioned leadership in terms of organising and attending inservices with staff, some referred to the development of ancillary staff specifically while others indicated a need to maintain their own professional

development in order to be credible role models for their staff.  
The comments below give a brief reflection of some of the responses:

Guiding the process of curriculum development

Reading all materials relevant to professional growth

Ensuring professional growth and awareness of all staff members

My own professional development - increasing my knowledge in all school related areas.

Being responsible for the academic policies required by the Dept and resourcing associated programs

Beginning teachers program

Negotiated professional development goals to determine individual and whole school needs

Assist career paths

Distance education - professional development of home tutors

Inservice and implementation of new syllabus

Parent workshops for parent helpers and parents

supporting students at home

Supervision practices - negotiated goals

Setting the direction of the school (the vision)

Overseeing the development and implementation of high quality learning programs

Staff development - self, teachers, ancillary

Supervision of Special education teachers (only executive with special ed qualifications)

Guiding staff to formulate personal goals and negotiating role played by me to achieve these

goals.

Maintaining staff morale through knowledge, support and utilising appropriate collegial groups

Welfare:

Issues of welfare within the school community also seemed to have an important role in the scheme of the principals' lives. The welfare issues related to dealing with the immediate needs of children and staff, developing and implementing program to promote equity, tolerance and well-being or an on-going commitment to relieve isolation for the children. Some of the items referred to by teachers included dealing with:

Leave, individual programs, morale, involvement by outside agencies, community relations, occupational health and safety issues

Assessment of students to ensure programs are matched to student needs

Reward systems; Strategies for behaviour management and assisting with behaviour modification

Multicultural program ; Aboriginal education ; Girls Education Strategy; Peer support program

Strong, positive student welfare programs

Counselling

Member of welfare committee

Seeking assistance from community, Departmental personnel for student welfare

Health, working conditions, social activities of staff

Staff support - staff aware that one is prepared to listen, assist if needed - with school, personal problems

General:

There were also several issues that didn't fit neatly into a 'category' as such or that the principals themselves allocated to the set of general concerns. Amongst these was a smattering of comments referring to dealing with gender as an issue and being accepted in spite of their sex. More common though, were comments referring to boosting morale, holding the place together and so on, for example, they felt it was part of the principal's role to ensure that they:

Stay positive for everyone's sake

Take the knocks, get up and keep going.

Turn the negatives to advantage where possible

#### Conclusion:

At this point then, we are able to direct our attention only to the raw comments made by these principals. We have purposely not sought to analyse these comments because the ensuing rounds of the Delphi may well redefine any preconceptions that such an analysis would encourage. A pre-emptive analysis would not be a reflection of the lived realities of these principals. What remains now is for the Delphi to be completed and thus to have emerge a consensus by and of these principals of what they consider to be the key elements of their role.

#### Reference:

Coombe, K., Retallick, J., Cocklin, B. and Clancy, S. (1992) School Administration: The Feminist Context. A paper presented at the Joint Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education and the New Zealand Association for Research in Education: Deakin University.