

WOMEN PRINCIPALS IN RURAL
CONTEXTS

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Introduction

In the present socio-political context of educational change, accompanied by an increasing focus on issues such as 'teacher quality', there are moves towards applying a generalist set of attributes to teaching. While recognition is often given to issues of professional development in seeking to improve quality of teaching, little attention has focussed specifically upon determining the everyday realities of what teachers see as the more important aspects of their professional lives. Certainly, with the moves towards 'quality' of teaching, and the continuing and escalating process of change in both structure and processes impacting upon teaching - devolution, school-based budgeting, schools councils, etcetera - it seemed more than timely to ask one group of teachers to report their views on the 'most important' aspects of their work.

The research reported here, then, sought the views of a group of women principals in rural New South Wales. The rationale for selecting this group was fairly clear-cut. Principals as a group are not only the recipients of policy directives from the bureaucracy but are also, in turn, deemed responsible for the implementation of these policies within their own organisation. Furthermore, in much of the literature on school leadership and management, consideration of the ways in which women approach their activities and responsibilities as principals appears under-represented. In light, then, of these factors this study sought to redress that imbalance in some small way.

The study commenced during the fourth term of 1992. 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 colleagues and others. A down-side to this timing however, was that the October-November period is one where teachers are busy so responses were not quickly returned. Nevertheless, the timing appeared not to diminish the significance given to the issues raised, but may have contributed to the 'mortality rate' in the first round of the Delphi procedure. It was this initial round that provided a focus for a paper presented to this Conference in 1992 (see, Coombe et al., 1992a). Rounds Two and Three were undertaken during the first term of the 1993 school year, and it is the overall findings from the investigation that provide the focus for the present paper.

Participants

The selection of participants sought to involve about 30 women principals from the Western and Riverina regions of the New South Wales Department of School Education. This was predicated on the fundamentally rural nature of these two regions, although it also met access criteria in that these regions form the major catchment area for Charles Sturt University.

An initial invitation to participate was forwarded to 101 schools (42 in the Riverina and 59 in the Western Region), from which sixty-three principals indicated their willingness to be involved in the study (22 from Riverina, 41 from Western). The first round Delphi was then sent to each of these principals. Of these 63, 46 (16 Riverina and 30 Western Region) returned first round responses. Round Two attracted returns from 39 principals (14 Riverina; 25 Western), while Round Three saw 37 returns (13 Riverina; 24 Western).

The Study

The study involved a Delphi technique, a research methodology based on

eliciting information in survey form, whereby a feed-back of responses procedure seeks to generate consensus. In this particular study, a three-round Delphi was used. The procedure can be outlined thus:

Round One required principals to respond to the following broad statement about their role as principal:

Please write about 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.

Here, the intention was that the principals should feel free to respond in whichever way they chose.

Round Two. The responses to the request were collated into broad themes and returned to the principals, along with their own Round One response, for them to select those items within each these they considered to be the most important. In Round Two, the principals were required to select a maximum of 20% of the items listed under each theme. No minimum was stipulated.

For Round Three those items that were generally the 20% of the items from Round Two that had attracted the highest support were fed back to the principals. This rule of thumb was modified in those cases where there was no clearly discernible gap between items and thus more than 20% of items were included in some instances. For example, the theme Personal Professional Development (see Table 1) saw one item from Round One, 'Establishing a collegial network' attract only one 'vote' thus leaving the remaining three items with a fairly even distribution of support. For Round Three, the principals were invited to rank on a seven-point Likert scale, the importance of each item to their role as principal (7 = extremely important, 1 = of no importance).

Results

The purpose of a survey of this nature is to generate consensus in order to determine those factors relating to one's position which are considered most important. The methodology sought to allow the participants to select these items progressively, until in Round Three they were asked to provide a ranking for the items within each theme. A summary of the results from Round Three is included in the tables 2-14 reporting the theme, the available items, and the analysis by mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum rating each item received.

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TABLE ONE
Themes

THEMES	No. ITEMS FROM ROUND 1	No. ITEMS FROM ROUND 2
ADMINISTRATION/MANAGEMENT	23	6
COMMUNICATION	9	2
ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP	15	3
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP	11	4
ROLE MODEL	6	4
STAFF WELFARE AND DEVELOPMENT	12	3
PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	4	3
STUDENT WELFARE	11	4
TEACHING	13	4
COMMUNITY EDUCATION/RELATIONSHIPS	15	5
INTERPERSONAL SKILLS AND RELATIONSHIPS	15	4
PERSONAL TRAITS	30	11
VALUES	12	6

TABLE 2
Administration/Management

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Marketing the school and public education.	5.6351	1.3263	2.0	7.0
Administration of the school within Dept. guidelines, ...	6.0946	0.7979	4.0	7.0

Financial management...	6.4730	0.7260	5.0	7.0
Managing change within the school.	6.22970	0.75094	0.07	0.0
Having a vision of the school in the future and the ability to plan for this to occur.	6.55410	0.72444	0.07	0.0
Training and development.	6.22970	0.7509	5.0	7.0

TABLE 3
Communication

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Ability to resolve conflict.	6.55410	0.76184	0.07	0.0
Ability to communicate effectively at all levels.	6.85140	0.35096	0.07	0.0

TABLE 4
Administrative Leadership

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Ensuring professional growth and awareness of all staff members.	6.28380	0.69265	0.07	0.0
Facilitating channels between all members of the school community - negotiation, mediation and information dissemination.	6.12160	0.73984	0.07	0.0
Guiding the process of curriculum development and implementation relevant	6.28380	0.69265	0.07	0.0

to the students.

TABLE 5
Educational Leadership

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Setting the direction of the school - the vision.	6.3378	0.88234	0.07	0.07
Creating an atmosphere/environment which develops the ideas of mutual support ...	6.6351	0.67345	0.07	0.07
To inspire and motivate pupils, staff, parents and community to work together ...	6.85114	0.42275	0.07	0.07
Provide quality, relevant, exciting curriculum.	6.22971	0.33641	0.07	0.07

TABLE 6
Role Model

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Leadership role - role modelling, my	6.0676	0.91414	0.07	0.07

philosophy, ...

To set an example for the children and the
community - woman is capable ...

Act as a role model to staff and students.

Set high standards and expectations for
myself ...

TABLE 7
Staff Welfare and Development

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Maintaining staff morale.	6.52700	0.76334	0.0	7.0
Ensure that self and staff are provided with opportunities for staff development.	6.31080	0.65995	0.0	7.0
Staff support - staff aware that one is prepared to listen, assist if needed.	6.50000	0.60095	0.0	7.0

TABLE 8
Personal Professional Development

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Self-education to improve ability to deal with all other aspects of job.	6.36490	0.85514	0.0	7.0
Keeping abreast of current education issues and strategies.	6.14860	0.82384	0.0	7.0

Continuing self-growth and skill development.
6.28380.73164.07.0

TABLE 9
Student Welfare

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Student welfare receives top priority personal, social, moral, academic devel. ...	-6.66220	.52785	.07	.0
Catering to individual needs of students.	6.25681	.11571	.07	.0
Strong, positive student welfare programs.	6.41891	.11501	.07	.0
Providing a safe and stimulating learning environment.	6.55410	.72444	.07	.0

TABLE 10
Teaching

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Principal must be committed to teaching and learning.	6.75680	0.58485	0.07	0.0
Ensure that the children receive the best education possible.	6.74320	0.54805	0.07	0.0
Assessment of students to match programs to needs.	6.36490	0.78755	0.07	0.0
Motivating pupils to enjoy learning and see education as a life-long process.	6.33781	1.13071	0.07	0.0

TABLE 11
Community Education/Relationships

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Seeking to empower parents and community.	5.56311	1.04522	0.07	0.0
Work with parent bodies, raise parent expectations and educational awareness ...	5.82431	1.02892	0.07	0.0
School leadership to the community, being the up-front person ...	5.93240	0.86734	0.07	0.0
Working as closely as possible with my school community to attain common goals.	6.14860	0.94923	0.07	0.0
Providing for community education knowledge of the school, the curriculum changes in education etc.	5.73610	0.98193	0.07	0.0

TABLE 12
Interpersonal Skills and Relationships

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Being a good listener and giving people time when they need it.	6.4189	0.68235	0.07	0.0
Be super-organised to be both teaching principal, educ. leader and school manager.	6.1757	0.86784	0.07	0.0
Ensure participative collaborative decision making.	6.3108	0.65995	0.07	0.0
Ability to relate to and interact positively with diverse range of people.	6.4370	0.68665	0.07	0.0

TABLE 13
Personal Traits

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Be accessible.	6.2027	0.7769	4.0	7.0
Be a good listener and very perceptive.	6.5000	0.5528	5.0	7.0
Able to think on their feet and make sound decisions.	6.2639	0.6916	5.0	7.0
Have credibility.	6.4730	0.6866	5.0	7.0
Have integrity.	6.5946	0.5873	5.0	7.0
Stay positive.	6.4459	0.6432	5.0	7.0
Have a realistic attitude.	6.3194	0.7852	4.0	7.0
Able to consult with others.	6.5000	0.7638	4.0	7.0
Be flexible.	6.5541	0.7244	4.0	7.0
Clear thinking enough to see the big picture.	6.4459	0.7974	4.0	7.0
Able to set aside time for self and family.	6.4459	0.6850	5.0	7.0

TABLE 14
Values

Item	Mean	Std.dev	Min.	Max.
Collaboration	6.5811	0.5466	5.0	7.0
Delegation	6.3649	0.7514	5.0	7.0
Consultation	6.5541	0.5984	5.0	7.0
Empowerment	6.3108	0.8445	4.0	7.0
Negotiation	6.5000	0.6009	5.0	7.0
Participation	6.5541	0.6850	5.0	7.0

The process of generating consensus clearly occurred. As can be seen from the preceding tables, the highest level of consensus occurred with one particular item in the category of communication (see, Table 3). The item, Ability to communicate effectively at all levels generated the smallest standard deviation (0.3509), with all respondents attributing this item with a '7' or '6' level of importance, resulting in a mean of 6.8514. These results, then, clearly point to those aspects these participants attributed as the 'most important' in the conduct of their personal and professional lives.

Discussion

Much of the consideration of educational administration from the point of view of women has emphasised the lack of women in senior management positions in schools, and the perceived blocks against the promotion of women (see, Coombe et al., 1992b). Although it may be claimed that the historical blocks precluding the employment and advancement of women in educational administration are no longer given overt legitimacy, nevertheless, they continue to be legitimated by the relative exclusion of women from the higher management structures and what O'Brien (1985) referred to as the 'truth by consensus'. The preconceptions and the social constraints against the promotion of women continue to be well embedded in an ideology of biological determinism - the things that women are expected to do because of the way "they are made". This, in turn, further contributes to the patriarchal structures that have effectively displaced and made invisible women in administrative practice.

In contrast, the work undertaken in South Australia by the Women's Adviser's Unit (WAU) highlights the particular contribution of women in various industries. This work also points to the attributes of women that are utilised by employers but which are not 'measurable' and thus are less likely to appear as 'of importance' in the current discourse of 'educational reform' with its emphasis upon 'measurability' of competencies (see, Coombe, et al., 1993). Among the attributes women contribute they suggest:

It appears that the socialisation of women into successful modes of social interaction ensures that the [institution's] goals of customer service excellence are achieved despite the barriers erected by the [institution] itself. This is one of many instances of women's skills ... not being formally recognised but nevertheless appropriated by an employer to its considerable advantage. (WAU, 1992:15) Similarly, Capper (1993) has pointed to the less 'measurable' aspects of the ways in which women perform their roles. She draws on the work of Kenway and Modra (1992) and Blackmore (1989) to develop a set of feminist perspectives of educational leadership. For example, Capper (1993:13) indicates that feminist leadership included an emphasis on people and process; responsibility to others; establishing connections between people, between people and ideas, and between people and policy; capacity to activate connections; empowering others; a style that is educative, non-hierarchical and consistent with the view of participation and dialogue as educative processes; co-operative and consultative approaches; collaborative style; supportive, sharing; good interpersonal relationships and communication and mutual support.

At this point, it is germane to the current discussion to reflect upon

those attributes that the participants in the present study ranked as 'most important'. As previously indicated, the item Ability to communicate effectively at all levels was rated the most highly, having the smallest standard deviation (0.3509), all principals rating it with a '6' or '7', resulting in a mean of 6.85. Closely following was the item To inspire and motivate pupils, staff, parents and community to work together with a standard deviation of 0.4227, all rating it between '5' and '7' producing the same 6.85 mean. Selecting a base of mean score of 6.5 or above, then, Table 15 presents those attributes that were identified by the women principals as being of primary importance to their roles.

TABLE 15
Items rated above mean of 6.5

Item	Mean
Having a vision of the school in the future...	6.56

Ability to resolve conflict.	6.56
Ability to communicate effectively at all levels.	6.85
Creating an atmosphere/environment which develops the ideas of mutual support.	6.64
To inspire and motivate pupils, staff, parents and community to work together.	6.85
Maintaining staff morale.	6.53
Staff support.	6.50
Student welfare policies have top priority.	6.67
Providing a safe and stimulating working environment.	6.56
Principal must be committed to teaching and learning.	6.76
Ensure that children receive best education possible.	6.75
Have integrity.	6.60
Able to consult with others.	6.50
Be a good listener and very perceptive.	6.50
Undertakes consultation.	6.56
Undertakes participation.	6.56
Undertakes negotiation.	6.50

The similarities shared by the sets of characteristics identified by the women in the present study and those from Capper (1993) are noteworthy. When each of the tables from this investigation is revisited, a portrait of the personal face of education is further revealed. This visage is one that highlights community collective attitudes and values as being of crucial importance (see, Blackmore, 1989).

The principals in the present study have clearly pointed to a collective approach to educational administration. Their concerns are to support, collaborate and empower those in their professional and educational community. Certainly, as Table 15 indicates, these principals clearly

indicated their 'most important' aspects of their role as being: effective

communicators; encouraging collaborative work practices within and beyond the school; supporting staff and student welfare, and personal, professional, and academic development; and engaging in open, collaborative, negotiated praxis. Their needs for their own professional development outlined throughout the conduct of this survey have indicated no needs to masculinise their practice but rather to hone their existing skills and foci. Through so doing, these principals sought to develop strategies to incorporate the technocratic nature of aspects of management inherent in both their position and the change agenda and discourse in ways that were commensurate with their existing approaches and philosophies. They also identified a need to be able to find time for their own continuing professional development, as well as allowing time for personal and family relationships and responsibilities. In short, the women recognised that they are effective educational leaders but they strive to improve every aspect of their role. Their needs encompass issues like improving conflict resolution, developing collegial relationships and networking with other women in similar positions for support and guidance.

Also evident here was the point that these principals were not fettered by a perspective that held that there was 'one answer' type solutions to educational administration. Indeed, while consensus was obtained, this process exposed primarily those characteristics that by nature are highly variable and subjective. Accordingly, it might be suggested that a form of 'reflection in action' was in effect, whereby:

...critical consciousness facilitates analysis of the context of problem situations for the purpose of enabling people together to transform their reality rather than merely understand it or adapt to it with less discomfort. (Kenway and Modra, 1989:12)

Such an approach allows the notions of critical analysis to become more accessible such that one is more likely to ask 'Whose interests are being served by the status quo?'. In turn, this opens up the power for these women principals to focus on their own experiences, as administrators, teachers, and individuals, unfettered by patriarchal expectations and determinations.

Conclusion

While a primary focus within much of the discourse on educational reform, and the concomitant view of 'efficiency' and administration couched in managerial terms, brought to the debate on teacher 'quality' has been on determining quantifiable delimitations of educational practice, we have sought here to focus on the lived reality of rural women principals. The important aspects of their professional lives as described by these principals are largely not those against which one can place a 'mark' unless on a highly subjective basis. Rather, they indicate values, attitudes and strategies which might serve as parameters and guides for those aspiring to the role of principal. Certainly, they make explicit the contradiction often apparent between the declared intentions of schools and

the reality of management practices (see, Gray, 1989). In short, whereas schools generally declare that they provide sites where individuality and difference are respected, where openness and negotiated dialogue are encouraged, with a 'nurturant' philosophy and approach, these are essentially incompatible with the technical-rational management position emphasising 'efficiency'. On the other hand, through adopting their particular administrative practices and philosophies, it becomes apparent that these women principals were adopting a multidimensional, empowering and relational view concerned with collective activities and values. The overall emphasis, then, in their ranking of their important aspects is one of duty of care to the educational community, flexibility and creativity.

The directions and considerations of women such as these have long been discounted or marginalised. It should not be denied that approaches to educational administration such as those outlined by these principals will

lend credibility to the restructuring of education into the future. Their voices can no longer be ignored if we can continue to support a view of education as a place of empowerment where people are provided with opportunities to take control over their own lives.

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