

## **Which school? The secret business of principal supply**

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A stream of articles in the 'Education' section of newspapers written in the period 1998-2003 as well as journal articles and reports written in the same time frame referred to a decline in the number of applicants for principal vacancies at both an international level (Olson 1999; Pugmire 1999; Bell 2001; Bowser 2001; Jones 2001; Kruger, Van Eck et al. 2001; Rader 2001; Williams 2001; Beaudin, Thompson et al. 2002; Bond 2002; Johnson 2002; Cervini 2003) and at a local level (Bond 2002; Lacey 2002; Rance 2002; Carlin, d'Arbon et al. 2003; Cervini 2003; Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei 2003). A majority of authors considered the problem of a declining interest in principalship to be widespread, and predicted it was likely to get worse over the coming decade. However, it was suggested, in a recent re-appraisal of the situation, that a shortage of principal applicants was not at a stage that it could be described as pervasive and that the problem was, in fact, confined to particular schools or particular districts (Roza, Celio et al. 2003).

We began *An investigation of the declining supply of principals in Australia* by determining how knowledgeable we were able to talk about a shortage of principal applicants in this country. We found and relied on two major studies on succession planning, one conducted by d'Arbon and colleagues in the Catholic sector (2002), the other by Lacey (2003) who concentrated on Victorian government teachers. These provided a basis from which to launch a new investigation. We were interested, in particular, in the unusual situation, in both studies, that a decline in the number of applications for principal vacancies was acknowledged and yet figures about interest in school leadership were relatively high: the Catholic Education study showed that 34.5% of senior leaders in the system were actively considering applying for a principal position (d'Arbon et al 2002 p 5) and the Victorian study indicated that 24% of teachers had leadership aspirations that extended to principal class (Lacey 2003 p 7). Neither one nor the other figure was consistent with the idea that the supply of principals might be uncertain in the future: the figures seemed too high to indicate a critical decline in interest in the principalship. If people had indicated, at the time of the surveys, that they were interested in applying for leadership positions, why might they not have applied? This continued to be a puzzle until we accumulated sufficient data - qualitative data - to make sense of it.

We had commenced the research with a demographic study, which showed a smaller cohort of teachers - about half the current cohort from which principals are drawn (Preston 2002 p 2) - advancing to school leadership positions. Subsequent information, obtained in interviews and focus group meetings, indicated that, in almost every district, the number of applicants was down on figures from the eighties and nineties and this seemed to confirm the view that there was a problem with future supply of educational leaders. As the volume of data grew there was reason to change this view: it became clear that the situation was more complex than it appeared to be, initially. We found that a decline in the number of applicants did not necessarily indicate a decline in interest in school leadership, a finding with interesting links to the d'Arbon and Lacey studies. This is 'secret business'. A number of generalisations could also be made about 'which' schools are associated with the notion of decline.

The 'secret' or not so obvious factors involved in the supply of principals presented us not only with a challenge to reappraise the value of statistics and projections in our research but a challenge to confront the overlapping issues of loss of diversity (Fenwick and Pierce 2001; Jones 2001) and quality (Krüger 1996) among principal applicants. Further complexity resulted from the need to be flexible in the interpretation of 'decline' in the research project: a small number of applicants, it was evident, could be regarded as a decline in one locality but not in another. We allowed research participants to form their own understandings of decline, relevant to their context, and we avoided over-simplifying the data for convenience. This produced a chequerboard of detail.

### *Which school?*

The complexity surrounding the data made the research findings somewhat hard to pinpoint, at times, but we had the benefit of drawing on a rich and varied material. We found, for example, that a decline in applications could be identified according to a leafy suburbs/industrial suburbs divide in one state but not in another. Class structure had little meaning in some locations where we conducted research: in fact becoming principal of a school where children were in need of special support was viewed as an

opportunity, not a deterrent for some applicants. It has not been easy, therefore, to work out categories of schools where shortages of applicants are a problem in terms of location. Remoteness and isolation could be identified as factors influencing application rates in some districts but not in others. There were clear differences from place to place. The few schools that have had trouble attracting applicants for a principal vacancy are not necessarily those with a high migrant population, with low income families, at the busy intersection of transport routes or out in the bush. Location and demography may be a problem - or they may not: it is not predictable. What the research has shown is that, in Victoria and South Australia alike, the schools that attract fewer applicants than most schools, across the systems, are those that are very large or very small. Our research participants regarded a school with over 800 students a large school and a small school as one having fewer than 200 students. It has been rare for schools between these extremes to experience trouble in attracting applicants for the position of principal unless they have a poor reputation.

It is, in some respects, difficult to accept the idea that a decline in the interest in school leadership is linked to very small schools. They would seem an ideal choice for a person undertaking their first principalship, for example. Similarly, it is not easy to envisage a direct relationship between a decline in applications and very large schools. Many experienced principals, one would imagine, would welcome the chance to move to a bigger challenge, perhaps a large, elite, city school. Yet the very small and the very large schools, irrespective of whether they are in the right part of town or not, whether they are remotely located or not, have not, in general, attracted substantial fields of applicants. There is a preference for 'safe' schools and avoidance of schools which present special challenges. Only a few people identify themselves as capable of meeting the challenges presented by schools at both ends of the spectrum. Why is a small school not a 'safe' school, one might wonder. It became apparent, from the research results, that the small school is not only difficult to run, for a variety of reasons, but that it constitutes a career dead-end for many a person. No longer the 'stepping stone' to higher positions that they once were under an hierarchical system of promotion, small schools have become 'traps', we were told. That is, principals of small schools have, in many cases, had difficulty moving out of their positions after a number of years because, under merit selection, a move can be a long time coming, especially if one has no experience of working in a larger school: this has deterred others from applying in the first place.

#### *Secret business*

Along with the noticeable trend in small and large schools there were factors, the research showed, that influenced rates of applications for jobs in a less conspicuous way. It is clear, as Lacey points out, that not all aspirants become applicants: there is often reason for people to hold back from applying. The data we collected revealed that a reduction in the number of applicants for a position (where a good number of applications were expected) was most commonly caused by a situation involving an incumbent - an incumbent re-applying for their job. In both South Australia and Victoria the sensitive issue of competing for a position against an incumbent has led to a secret code of behaviour, among both principals and aspirants, that putting in an application is unacceptable. An ex-principal, reflecting on her experiences several years ago, explained:

There were 'rules' such as you did not apply for a friend's job. So you had to know that about a school and you had to know whether or not someone had been acting in the position, looking after it while there was a principal working his way to retirement and therefore deserved the position, so people didn't apply for those jobs. People didn't apply for jobs where they perceived there was somebody ready to take it. I can remember when my job was re-advertised; there was one application that was from someone way out in the country who obviously didn't understand the 'rules'. No-one from round about applied.

The 'secret business of principal supply' has been surrounded by speculation and rumour, the research revealed. There was a lot of speculation among principals, assistant principals and leading teachers, we were told, about who was applying for a position and if there was as much as a suspicion that an incumbent or a friend was applying, this had a direct influence on the number of applications for a position. Our investigation showed that, at times, positions had to be re-advertised when people had incorrectly assumed that an incumbent was reapplying:

One of the hardest things is to push out the information that the current incumbent is not applying. Because in the principal networks if there's a sense of an incumbent applying it dries up the field immediately and even when the incumbent sometimes makes it very clear that

they're not, then people don't believe them and, unless they've won something else, they just don't believe it and so they don't apply. And often you have to re-run a position in order to show people that the incumbent is not applying and then you get a really different field. I'm just doing, currently, a director's position in a pre-school, one of our most difficult pre-schools, and our highest classification of director and, you know, the field is just non-existent because people thought, although the current director said she wasn't applying, she really was and so they didn't apply. And that pattern is repeated often when there are incumbents.

This, the negative side of the professional norm of collegiality, takes the form of contrived collegiality (Hargreaves 1994). Often based on inaccurate speculation, it is probably more concerned with 'not rock rocking the boat' or being seen as being too eager to gain promotion rather than professional recognition.

A second factor is influential in relation to incumbents: a sense of futility about applying for a position in competition with an incumbent because incumbents are, most commonly, successful in regaining their positions. This phenomenon, widely observed and talked about, deters many an aspirant from putting in the time and effort to submit an application because to do so would be pointless. Figures giving the numbers of applicants for positions, we came to understand, do not accurately reflect the number of people who are seriously interested in school leadership.

The selection process was another factor influencing the numbers of applicants for positions. It was already known, from earlier studies (d'Arbon, Neidhart et al, 2002; Lacey, 2003), that selection was a significant issue. Applicants, it was reported, were frustrated with the complexity of the application and the amount of time needed to complete it but in the conduct of our research we discovered another factor, a decline in respect for the merit selection process, to be a very important factor. Failure of the merit selection process from working as it was intended, for the best applicant to be selected, has caused some people to refrain from applying for positions which did, in fact, interest them. We were told, on a number of occasions, that it was common for a favourite applicant to have an advantage with a selection panel and that other applicants had little chance of getting noticed when this was the case. Not everyone has confidence in the merit selection process. Superintendents, key players on interview panels, for example, clearly act as gate-keepers to keep some people out and champions to support others.

There was talk among some research participants of an 'old boys' network in which decisions were made about who would be selected to fill particular positions. It worked, essentially, by a regional director's representative on a panel subtly influencing panel members such as parents or young, inexperienced teacher representatives in their decision making: they were often able to sway people's opinions sufficiently to get an outcome that suited them. The choice was, invariably, somebody whom they considered ideal as a member of their network, somebody of similar outlook and this trend, of manipulating selection, excluded some people of considerable merit from being selected. There was a difference of opinion among research participants as to whether 'old boys' networks still existed. Women, who were disadvantaged by them, have increasingly moved into principal class and, in some locations, if not throughout the system, have become more numerous than men. In some instances there was talk of gender issues persisting or re-emerging after a period of equal opportunity. In any case, a loss of confidence in merit selection has been linked to a decline in application for principal positions by some people. Pritchard's study in Western Australia demonstrated this convincingly (Pritchard, 2003). In Pritchard's study 44% of survey respondents listed the selection process as the greatest deterrent for them to apply.

A different kind of bias was noted to have been at work in regions where district superintendents had a major role in determining the outcome in principal selection. Superintendents have been known to favour certain kinds of applicants to work in their area and in the absence of a state-wide standard for selection, people not fitting into the mould of the director's favourite were often frustrated in their efforts to become a principal. Some superintendents sought people with strong managerial characteristics so that the schools in their district would be run effectively from an administrative point of view. Other superintendents were known to favour people with innovative ideas or people with a solid understanding of educational theory and practice: some valued experience more than potential. This biased approach to selection enabled people to predict whether they had a chance of getting selected in particular locations and the loss of confidence in the selection process can be directly linked with a reduction in the application rate for vacant positions.

We believe that 'secret business' and, sometimes, discreditable business are factors that have complicated the 'supply' issue and made it increasingly difficult to make sense of figures that we might use as a guide to predict the future of educational leadership. We may be led to believe that there is a critical situation in some schools because the number of applicants is low and yet it may be no more than the incumbent's influence or it might be the influence of a regional director or superintendent: on the other hand, an element of crisis may be in the wind. It is difficult to be sure. Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei (2003), on writing about 'leadership disengagement' are careful not to reduce the supply issue to simple explanations, and, particularly, not to single causes. But leadership disengagement cannot be ignored as a contributing factor in the supply of school leaders and, in fact, suggestions that 'intensified, expanded and restructured work roles' and 'changing conceptions of professional identity and career commitment' (Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei 2003 p 11) are important parts of the whole have been confirmed in our research.

#### *Principal deterrents*

The move to self-managing schools, as we know, brought with it enormous changes to the role and workload of a principal. The fact that principals frequently voice their frustration with the changes and utter despair at the range of things that are expected of them have acted as a deterrent for others to move into principal class. Younger people who might normally aspire to progress to principal class are developing a negative view of being a principal. Research participants of varying backgrounds remarked that the impact of principals' negative feedback to their colleagues has resulted in a reluctance for others to become school leaders. The following depicts typical thinking:

*Speaker:* Like I'm an assistant principal, like the whole job is overwhelming. Between HRMs, PRMs, and CASES, finance, and CASES 21, and occ health and safety, and asbestos management, and all those sorts of things. Like I just look at it and think.

*Interviewer:* So are you going to apply?

*Speaker:* No. Not at the moment I wouldn't.

*Interviewer:* What would change your mind?

*Speaker:* I think it just takes a long time to get to know everything. Like you feel like you need to know everything but you can't possibly.

The weight of accountability, pressure from parents, the shift from managing discipline to establishing social and emotional supports for students and a diverse range of expectations, such as the expectation of skilful financial management, act as a deterrent for many people who might otherwise aspire to become a principal.

Information we obtained through principals' associations and the Australian Education Union suggests that there are competent principals who have signalled their intention to resign or not reapply for their position when it becomes vacant because they have 'had enough'. Many principals, individually and in group discussion, gave voice to their regret that the principalship had become strongly management oriented and regret that educational leadership was not at the centre of a principal's work. There was a feeling, among some, that teachers are electing to stay in the classroom to avoid the fate of becoming an administrator: they said that some teachers aspiring to be principals are reluctant to let go of their teaching to become a manager rather than an educational leader. The research data points to changes in the role and work of a principal being linked with a decline in the number of applications. A strong commitment that 'they were there for the kids' prevented many assistant principals from taking the next step.

#### *Societal and generational changes*

Some research participants linked the decline in applications for principal vacancies to changes in family life and changes in society. Whereas teachers, particularly men, were once quite prepared to move to a new district in order to secure a principal position, this seems to have changed significantly over time. Teachers, like other professional people, are likely to have partners with a career of their own, and that career may not easily be transferred to a new location. Where women might once have given priority to the 'head of the household's' job, they are currently encouraged to maintain their own

position and not sacrifice themselves. Rather than jeopardising the career of one of the partners, in the modern relationship, with its regard for equal opportunity, people choose a safe option, stay within a locality, taking the opportunities that arise there instead of seeking them elsewhere. They are less likely to move house to take up distant positions even if the benefits could be considerable. This shift in family relations and patterns of work has resulted, especially in South Australia, in lower mobility for teachers: fewer teachers are applying outside their local area than ever before. This has contributed, it seems, to a lowering of the numbers applying for rural positions.

Mobility of principals and teachers wanting to take up principal positions has not only been affected by egalitarian movements and the part career maintenance plays in that: it has also been affected by lifestyle changes of a more general kind. Lifestyle issues have affected country regions most of all. The outlook that living in the country is a healthy choice, ideal for raising a family is not as strong as it used to be. Parents are more likely to be concerned about access to education for their children (often private schools in the city), access to health facilities, entertainment and things of that are commonly associated with a good lifestyle. Country towns seem, in present circumstances, to be viewed as places that can hinder rather than advance a family's prospects and, as was mentioned earlier, they have become places that can engulf people, making it difficult to leave. It is safer not to apply in the first place, many potential applicants conclude. People are not prepared to take the risk; by not applying they at least maintain their lifestyle and preserve family harmony.

It is well known that more than half of the country's teachers are aged 45 years or more (MCEETYA 2003) and that an increasing number of older people in education services will retire in the coming years (Preston 2002). The young, or relatively young teachers currently in schools, identified as likely to be promoted into principal class, to cover a shortfall in supply, have good prospects of becoming educational leaders. Whether they will take up opportunities as they arise or not is not certain. As studies such as that by MCEETYA and the AEU (2003) suggest, and as we can confirm from our research, young teachers are more likely to envisage themselves as having moved out of education within five to ten years rather than having stayed in the system. There are two aspects to the exodus of young teachers from the profession. On the one hand, graduate teachers, frustrated by the difficulties that confront them at school, particularly unpleasant experiences with parents, are likely to take the attitude that if things do not improve for them in two to three years, they will leave. They will seek alternative employment. On the other hand, young teachers, whose teaching experiences have left them feeling reasonably satisfied, may still seek out other opportunities elsewhere because that is the modern way of life. One no longer stays in the same job or even the same occupation for long periods of time: the pattern is to change after five or six years, to seek stimulation elsewhere and not be consumed by any one organization (Gronn and Rawlings-Sinaei 2003 p 10). This scenario is, perhaps, the most serious aspect of the supply issue.

Nonetheless, a new wave of influences appears ready to provide an effective counterweight to this trend. In the course of our research we compiled information about numerous leadership development programs conducted by state leadership units, professional associations, regional offices of departments of education and the AEU. The need for some form of succession planning, having been identified, has resulted in the targeting of younger people for leadership positions, especially in Victoria, where the Blueprint for Government Schools (2003) is poised to exert some influence on leadership. Local initiatives, driven largely by principals who have been persuaded of the need to foster young talent, have made an impact as well in some places: people in their early 30s have recently taken on principal positions, even in large secondary schools.

### *Conclusion*

In summarising the factors that have affected applications for principal positions in the period 2002-2005 it is clear that there are two distinct trends that have contributed to the perception, real or otherwise, that there has been a decline in interest in school leadership. The first of these is a tendency for people to be more strategic in their application for vacant positions than in earlier times, such as the mid eighties when the introduction of merit selection resulted in 'an avalanche of applications'. People have become more selective in their applications for clearly identifiable reasons. Some will refrain from lodging an application for a position which interests them because their knowledge of merit selection, and who is likely to succeed, enables them to predict whether they will be successful or not. Incumbents, or local applicants, for example, are highly likely to be selected. They avoid applying for positions where they see powerful factors other than merit to be at work. Another reason for interested people to refrain from applying is the personal or collegiate factor: they know an incumbent is re-

applying; they have a friend, against whom they feel disinclined to compete, who is applying; they understand that a person who has been acting in a position deserves to be chosen. These are the major influences which cause a decline in the rate of application for some positions: the interest in these positions may, however, be substantial.

The second trend, running parallel to the first, is a decline in applications caused by changes in society and changes in the work of a principal. A major factor at work is that, for most people, family comes first. There is a reluctance for people to uproot their families to move to a new location, a reluctance to disrupt a partner's career, a reluctance to move to a place that does not support a lifestyle of their choosing. The reduction in mobility caused by this trend, an unwillingness to risk the 'stepping stone' idea, where people move away for a short period of time, more popular in former times, has contributed to a real decline in the rate of application for principal jobs. Another influential factor has been generational change, young people planning to be out of education within a number of years instead of remaining in the profession for the long term. Most potent of all is the fact that significant numbers of people are deterred by the modern principalship with its emphasis on management rather than educational leadership and the pressure to do both with unfairly limited resources.

Our investigation into the decline of the supply of principals in Australia has confirmed that there are powerful forces that have contributed to a reduction in the numbers of people applying for positions but that there are other factors, in addition, what we have referred to as 'secret business', which appear, from the outside, to be about a decline but are actually not so. It is virtually impossible to depict, in a definitive way, the decline in interest in school leadership because of the overlap of a multitude of factors: it is only possible to get impressions of what is going on. The overall finding of our investigation into the supply of principals is that it is not a simple, quantifiable matter. A decline in applications does not necessarily mean a decline in interest in leadership. While there have been, and continue to be clear deterrents for people to take on the principalship, there are multiple factors at work, in any vacancy, that may cause a small number of applications to be lodged. These need to be analysed on a case by case basis to get an adequate understanding of what is at work.

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