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Doom and gloom or a time for optimism: Potential aspirants’ views about school leadership – now and for the future.

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Abstract

Principal recruitment has attracted national and international attention in recent years (eg. Barty et al, 2005 in Australia; Earley et al, 2002 in the UK; Brooking et al, 2003 in New Zealand; Williams, 2003 in Canada). Importantly, Australian research in both state and non-state schools suggests that potential principal aspirants are less enthusiastic than might be expected in their desire to become principals (D’Arbon et al, 2002; Cranston et al, 2004; Lacey, 2002).

Given the importance of ensuring we have quality leaders for our schools in the future, the research reported here (which is on-going) examined the views of potential aspirants (primary and secondary deputy principals) from one large government education system in Australia about the principalship and their intentions in seeking promotion (or otherwise) to such positions and the reasons driving these intentions. Data were collected via the Aspiring Principals Questionnaire (APQ) – especially developed for the study – comprising 38 closed items mainly of a Likert-type format, 5 open-ended items linked to particular closed items allowing participants to add their own suggestions/ideas, expand/elaborate on responses; and 4 further more general open-ended items.

A number of system-level policy and practice recommendations have been developed from the findings.

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Introduction

Despite recent arguments to reconceptualise our understandings about school leadership as something enacted not just by the principal and others in designated leadership positions, it remains the case that the principal is seen by teachers, parents, the wider community and ‘the system’ as the leader of the school. Coupled with the increasing responsibility and accountability demands being placed on principals in these ‘new times’ making such roles more demanding and complex, there is a strong interest and need in ensuring that the recruitment and selection of principals occurs in a context of the availability of a quality aspirant pool. Lacey and Gronn (2006) have argued that “(e)ncouraging and sustaining principal aspirants is imperative for the effective leadership of our schools in the future” (p. 8). The significance of issues surrounding principal recruitment was deemed sufficient to warrant a special issue of the Australian Journal of Education in 2003. More recently, the Australian Research Council has funded research into the area (see for example, Blackmore et al, 2005). In all of this, one important set of questions concerns just what potential aspirants think about school leadership, and the principalship in particular. To date, there has been little research addressing such questions.

This paper reports on some on-going research which is examining the answers to some of these questions for potential aspirants in the state schooling sector in Queensland. The findings discussed here draw from a comprehensive questionnaire, the Aspiring Principals Questionnaire (APQ) administered to deputy principals in primary and secondary schools in late 2005-early 2006. This is the first phase of analysis of this set of data, and provides a valuable “first look” at some important views aspirants hold about the principalship.

Background and context for the study

It is generally accepted that despite the attraction and positive impact of distributed, shared and multiple leadership models in schools (Cranston, 2000; Crowther et al, 2002; Gronn, 2003; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 1996) and other organisations (Limerick, Cunnington & Crowther, 2002), typically it is the principal who remains in the ‘hot seat’ and who, under self-managing school models, essentially is now responsible and accountable for almost everything that happens in the school. Not surprisingly then, there is now a plethora of research reporting that the roles of principals have changed significantly in recent years (see for example, Cranston, 2002; Cranston, Ehrich & Billot, 2003). Not only are they expected to be the educational leader of their school, but under the increasing managerialistic models of school operations, their role has emerged into one akin to a CEO in the private sector (Cranston, 1999; Gronn, 2003). Indeed, as our conceptualisations of schools and schooling for the future change (Beare, 2001; Caldwell, 2005; Caldwell & Spinks, 1998), the complexities and demands of, and on the principalship are likely to increase.

Given the accepted importance of principals to our schools, a number of issues and questions arise about how potential aspirants to such positions might view such positions. And do these views impact on the potential pool of principal aspirants from which quality leaders for the future might be drawn? Until recently, such questions tended not to be problematic for large education systems (state and non-state) as a large pool of potential applicants, such as deputy principals, identified as the natural set of next generation leaders. More recently, however, at least two factors have emerged as impacting on the aspirant pool. The first of these is the age profile of current principals. Consistent with the baby-boomer retirement phenomena elsewhere (Healey, 2003), the next few years are likely to see a significant increase in the number of retirees from the principalship as the average age of primary and secondary principals across various sectors and states in Australia nears typical retirement figures. The replacement demand of itself would perhaps not be a matter of major concern were it not for the second factor, viz, that there is increasing evidence that the aspirant pool may not be all that large.

Preston (2002) has looked at the availability of principals for the future in economic terms of ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ notions. On the ‘demand’ side, Preston (pp. 1-2) sees factors such as the current rate of change in principals’ positions; the age profile of current principals; and, the nature (attractiveness) of
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principals’ work relative to alternatives (including retirement). On the ‘supply’ side, she see factors such as the size and other characteristics of the cohorts below that of the current principals; the professional development, workplace and career experiences of that cohort;, and the nature (attractiveness) of principals’ work relative to alternatives (including staying in their current position). That is, quite simply, should the supply side not match the demand side, the question of how this will impact on the availability and quality of principal applicants becomes significant.

Some have described this phenomenon as principal disengagement (Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003) in a context of intensification of school leadership practice, characterised by de-motivation resulting from bureaucracy, excessive paperwork and constant change (Earley et al, 2002). While there is not space here to examine in detail this changing face of the principalship as noted above, it is a matter of considerable importance as we look at aspirants to such a position in the future, particularly as our current conceptualisations of the principalship may need to evolve and change.

Interest in principal disengagement is growing as schools, and from a more strategic point of view systems, endeavour to appoint their most senior school leaders for the next decade. In the USA, a 1998 survey commissioned by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals noted that half of the school districts surveyed reported a shortage in the labour pool for K-12 principal positions they were trying to fill that year regardless of location (NAESP, 2003). In summarising the findings of a number of related studies over the past several years, the study concluded that it was clear that “qualified professionals are not seeking the position of school principal” (p. 1). It also noted that “more and more principals have been nearing retirement eligibility … (and) … fewer and fewer individuals are attracted to filling these demanding positions” (p. 1).

Other research by Pounder et al (2003) in the USA actually raises some questions about the real status of the principal crisis in that country. Interestingly, Thomson et al (2003) suggest that part of the crisis in the USA is due to the media imagery of principals. That is, the negative media picture of the principalship is likely to exacerbate what is perceived to be a difficult situation by deterring aspiring principals. Brooking et al (2003) have identified principal recruitment problems in primary schools in New Zealand, noting the low numbers of women in the principalship. Williams’ (2003) work in Canada identified three main reasons for the principal shortage in Ontario: early retirement, inadequate preparation for policy implementation; and, major certification demands. He also sheds some light on those potential principals, who seem ideally suited to the role, but who decide against applying. Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei’s (2003) work in three states in Australia highlighted the challenges of having quality aspirational pools for the principalship in the future. Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei note that the situation regarding principal recruitment has not yet reached a “crisis” in Australia as has been the argument for some jurisdictions in the USA (see Young & McLeod, 2001). However, they suggest that disengagement from the principalship is “likely to be a product of teachers’ direct experiences of work intensification or their perceptions of it among senior colleagues … compound(ed by) changing sources of professional identity and career ” (p. 183).

Gronn (2003) has coined the term “greedy work” for this intensification of school leadership practice (pp. 147-156). That is, a situation where an individual leader is required to give total and sustained commitment – a type of occupational servitude. Draper and McMichael (2003) examined the career decision-making of aspirant principals in Scotland, reporting a declining interest in the principalship. Importantly, they note the positive impact of experience in acting principal positions on decisions of potential leaders subsequently applying for such positions.

In the UK, the appeal of school leadership to prospective leaders was a key focus of recent research commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills (Earley et al, 2002). In comments echoing those raised by Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei, Earley et al report research findings indicating:

Leaders in schools are de-motivated by over-bearing bureaucracy and excessive paperwork and also by ‘constant change’ in the education system. Balancing work and home life is an
increasing concern and more work is needed to make school leadership both an attractive and do-able task (p. 1).

In Australia, research by Lacey (2002) in Victoria has revealed that 88% of state school teachers and deputy principals had no intention of becoming principals. She notes that there is a “well documented shortage of principals internationally and anecdotal evidence of a potential shortage in Victoria and other states of Australia (p. 3). Lacey’s research pivoted around three key factors impacting on potential aspirants’ decisions to apply for the principalship: work motivation; career and personal life planning and values alignment (i.e. personal and organisational values. Gender issues affecting women’s’ decisions to become school leaders have been investigated by Young and McLeod (2001) in the USA. Their work suggested that there are three factors at play here: their administrative role models, their exposure to transformational leadership styles and the support they receive (p. 462).

In the Catholic school system in Australia, so serious is the concern that a major study was commissioned to look at the issue (D’Arbon et al 2001; 2002; D’Arbon, 2003). They noted that to understand the trends in interest (or lack thereof) in the principalship there needed to be an understanding of the roles of principals in these ‘new times’ as noted earlier. In particular, they saw the role extended “beyond primarily educational leadership to encompass increased legal responsibilities, enlarged managerial and accountability functions, and an expanded role as the more substantive and visible leader of the parish community” (D’Arbon, 2003, p. 13). Life-work balance was noted as an emergent tension from this expansion of their role. Importantly, their research took the next step and identified some practices as potential policy solutions, such as co-principal models, which might address the growing overly negative view aspirants might have of the principalship.

Research in the state secondary sector in Queensland and the non-state sector in Queensland and New South Wales with middle-level school leaders (eg. deputies, heads of school, deans of study) has re-enforced the findings as noted above, where aspirant numbers for the principalship are lower than might be hoped for (Cranston et al, 2004; Cranston, 2005).

Finally, the recent work of Blackmore et al (2005) identified a number of factors deterring applicants, including the increased scope and intensification of principals’ work, a lack of engagement with educational leadership and increased accountability demands (p. 1). The research also identified a number of aspects of principal selection processes acting as perceived (and actual) barriers to some applicants.

While the available research across various countries and systems is somewhat uneven in agreement about details of the issues raised here, there does seem to be broad agreement about the following:

- there is likely to be a ‘crisis’ of sorts in the depth and quality of the pool of applicants for the principalship; this situation has been brought on, in part, by the ageing of current principals and their impending retirement and the perceptions among potential aspirants of the principalship;
- there is general disengagement of potential applicants from seeking principal positions – this situation is expected to become more serious in the future;
- key factors playing a role in this disengagement include:
  - aspirants seeking to maintain a life-style that accommodates work, leisure, family and other pursuits;
  - a negative view of the principalship – frequently gained by observing first-hand those in the role as well as that conveyed among the teaching profession and more generally in the community and through the media; and,
  - and related to this point, the enhanced accountability, work load, complexities and challenges of the role of the principal.

While these issues have been variously canvassed in research in other places, no similar in-depth work, seeking the views of aspirants about the principalship has been done in the state schooling
sector in Queensland (Australia), a system comprising some 1 300 schools geographically dispersed schools across both city and rural/remote sites.

**Research focus and questions**

The research reported here examined the following research questions:

- What are the views of potential aspirants about the principalship?
- What are the intentions of potential aspirants in seeking promotion (or otherwise) to the principalship, and the reasons driving such intentions – encouraging, discouraging; and,
- What possible system-level policy recommendations can be identified from these findings?

**Research methodology**

The research draws on data from the *Aspiring Principals Questionnaire (APQ)* administered to deputy principals in state primary and secondary schools in Queensland. The APQ was especially developed for the study from concepts synthesised from the literature (eg. D’Arbon, 2003; Frazer & Lawley, 2000; Lacey, 2002; Oppenheim, 2000) as well as ideas from earlier research with similar groups of educational leaders (eg. Cranston et al, 2004). The APQ, in its final format, comprises 39 closed items (many of a Likert-type [Kerlinger & Lee, 2000] format); 2 open-ended items and a further 11 open-ended items linked to closed items allowing opportunity to add own suggestions/ideas, expand/elaborate on responses). The framework for the APQ is provided in the appendix. [It is not possible to discuss all the data available from the APQ here.]

Development of the APQ (Frazer & Lawley, 2000) was assisted by critical feedback from some key personal who completed the instrument in earlier trial formats (ABS, 1999; Oppenheim, 2000) – they included two principals, four deputy principals as well as two system-level human resources officers who also had a keen interest in the project. Feedback was sought on language/terminology used, clarity of instructions and of individual items, ease of responding and time taken to complete.

The APQ was distributed in electronic format on two separate occasions in two different ways in an endeavour to maximise the number of responses. There are approximately 1000 deputy principals in the target group. In each distribution, protocol required that initial contact in schools was made through the principal. In the first instance (late 2005), the two principals’ associations in Queensland distributed the questionnaire through their data base of members, with an accompanying letter of support. In the second, a database of principals email addresses was generated from the Education Queensland website of those schools likely to have deputy principals. The strategy of dissemination was thus targeted at principals in the first instance, inviting them to pass the materials (Letter of Invitation, APQ, and Participation Consent Form) to their deputy principals and encourage them to respond. Some deputy principals (who were members of the associations) would also have received the materials directly. The presidents of the two associations wrote supporting emails and notices in newsletters encouraging members to participate.

The APQ was administered electronically - respondents could complete it on-line, or alternatively, they could print the questionnaire out, complete it in hard copy and mail/fax it back if they preferred. The APQ takes about 15-20 minutes to complete – a little longer if respondents completed all the open-ended items. It was completed anonymously, although respondents could include contact details if they were willing to take part in the follow-up interviews to be held in the next phase of the research. In both stages of administration, a reminder follow-up for deputy principals to complete the APQ was sent via principals approximately two to three weeks after the initial distribution.

**Some limitations for this research**

For the purposes of this study, aspirants are confined to those currently in deputy principal (or equivalent) positions in state secondary and primary schools (including P-10 and P-12) in Queensland.
Obviously, there are other school-based people (e.g. Heads of Department) who might be included in a more liberal definition of principal aspirant.

The APQ is a very comprehensive questionnaire covering a variety of issues (refer Appendix) – it is only those questions that directly relate to the first two research questions above that are included for discussion here – mainly Sections 1, 3 and 4). Also to be noted is that for the purposes of the following discussion, all deputy principals (secondary and primary) are considered together. Similarities and differences across these two school sector groups and gender and other issues are the focus of other papers in preparation.

Findings and discussion

(i) **Respondents – brief profile**

One hundred and forty-six completed APQs were returned, 70 percent from city/urban locations, the remained from rural/remote locations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL TYPE</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents comprised 43 percent male and 57 percent female. Almost half were in the 36-45 age range, with about a third in the 46-55 range, and the remainder (almost 1 in 5) in the 25-35 age range. Almost one third had been in school leadership positions for more than 9 years, 40 percent for 4-9 years and the remainder (about a quarter) 3 years or less. These data suggest that the respondent sample for analysis represented a broad cross-section of this particular aspirant pool.

With respect to their current position, the vast majority of respondents report being satisfied (82%), with over a quarter very satisfied. Only about one in ten is dissatisfied – of this, only 1 percent is very dissatisfied. Almost 4 in 5 report thinking about doing another job – 6 percent very often, 20 percent often and over half, sometimes. About a half saw an alternative job as one not in schools or education, with about a third seeing the alternative in schools, and 20 percent in education but not in schools. These data suggest that while overall they appear to be a satisfied group, a good number are thinking about career alternatives outside schools, and some, away from education altogether.

(ii) **Views of potential aspirants about the principalship**

Three-quarters of the respondents believed that the variety and diversity of principals’ work had increased in recent years, with less than one-in-five thinking it had stayed about the same. These figures are similar when asked about others in schools, such as heads of department and teachers.

Respondents were asked to reflect on their observations of the work of principals. In particular, they were asked to compare what they saw as the activities typically carried out by principals (this is referred to as a real week) and the activities they might like principals to carry out in a preferred week (this is referred to as an ideal week). Table 1 summarises the data for this, using the amount of time spent on a series of activities as a means of comparison (the categories ‘great deal of time’ and ‘some time’ are combined).

Table 1: Observations of a typical (REAL) week compared with a preferred (IDEAL) week for principals
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| Activity                                                                 | TYPICAL or REAL WEEK [great deal + some time] | IDEAL or PREFERRED WEEK [great deal + some time] | DIFFERENCES %
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------
| Strategic leadership of the school (eg. visioning, cultural change, developing partnerships) | 83                                            | 100                                           | 17
| Educational/curriculum leadership (eg. close involvement in curriculum change processes, leading professional development) | 62                                            | 97                                            | 35
| Management/administration (eg. responding to system demands, accountability, budgeting, resourcing, data management) | 94                                            | 71                                            | -23
| Student issues (eg. behaviour management, enrolments)                    | 68                                            | 52                                            | -16
| Parent/community issues (eg. interviews, School Council/P&C meetings, marketing) | 90                                            | 91                                            | 1
| Staffing issues (eg. meetings, performance issues, complaints)           | 85                                            | 78                                            | -7
| Operational matters (eg. Facilities, timetabling, photocopying)          | 39                                            | 15                                            | -24

In comparing the two sets of activities (real v ideal), respondents noted they were similar (57%), very close (13%) and not close (30%). The major points of difference highlighted in these data are that aspirants would prefer the role of principal (at least in terms of this set of activities) as focusing:

- more on strategic and educational/curriculum leadership; and
- less on management and administration, student issues and operational matters.

In short, this suggests a more leadership and less management orientation to the role.

Respondents were then asked to identify possible factors or barriers they considered prevented principals from achieving a more ideal situation from their current real one – they were asked to rate these as to their level of influence as barriers. These data are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Factors or barriers inhibiting principals working in an IDEAL mode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor or barrier</th>
<th>Major influence</th>
<th>Minor influence</th>
<th>No influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are just too many demands on principals’ time to do any more</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals do not have the necessary skills to do activities too different from those undertaken at the moment</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The system sets specific responsibilities/roles for principals that must be fulfilled as priorities thus limiting their choices</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There have been changes in roles and responsibilities for all educators in schools and these flow on to principals thus limiting their choices</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three dominant factors or barriers all relate to time and role change issues for principals. The fourth factor, while of less influence but still evident, relates to the capabilities of principals.

Respondents were provided with the opportunity to add their own comments for this item. These provide some illustrations regarding the time and role changes noted in the table data.
**Principals make choices about how they allocate their time. Some may like to try and keep everything under their control which is understandable as they have the final responsibility**

**Breakdown in home parenting skills flowing into schools onto principals**

**Principals are employed to do a job, to lead school communities. Hold them accountable but give them the autonomy and ensuing resources to do the job they are employed to do. Don't waste money and resources on bureaucratic systems and structures that are not immersed in schools.**

Respondents were asked to rate the level of importance of various capabilities they considered principals should hold. These data are summarised in Table 3.

### Table 3: Capabilities considered important for principals to hold

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>Very Important + Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inspiring, visioning change for the school in others (e.g. teachers, parents)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrating strong interpersonal, people skills such as negotiation, communication and collaboration</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to delegate, empower others in decision-making and responsibilities</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing uncertainty for self and others</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing change for self and others</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to make considered, fair and ethically sound decisions</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep self-awareness and wisdom</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to develop supportive networks among colleagues</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being an effective and efficient manager and administrator</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the nine capabilities (the vast majority of which relate to leadership) provided in the item were rated highly by the respondents, suggesting that principals need to demonstrate a broad range of skills, knowledge, abilities and attributes. Those most highly rated focused on:

- strong interpersonal, people skills – negotiation, communication, collaboration;
- making considered, fair and ethically sound decisions; and,
- inspiring, visioning change for the school in others (e.g. teachers, parents).

The one capability relating directly to management issues, while overall rated as important, was at the lower end of the capability ratings.

### (iii) Intentions of potential aspirants in seeking promotion (or otherwise) to the principalship – and reasons driving such intentions (encouraging, discouraging)
Just over a half of the respondents report that they intend to seek promotion to the principalship in the future, 16 percent will not, and about a third was unsure. One-in-five had sought promotion three or more times previously and a further one-in-ten, twice before. Of those indicating they would seek promotion, over two-thirds said they would do so within 2 years, with the bulk of the rest planning to do so in 3 to 5 years. This suggests that a good number of this potential aspirant group will indeed be actively seeking principal positions soon.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various factors they saw as influencing their desire to become a principal. These factors related to what might be achieved once one became a principal. These data are provided in Table 4.

Table 4: Reasons for wanting to become a principal – perceptions about the principalship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Very Important + Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The capacity to positively influence the learning and lives of young people</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The opportunity to work with diverse individuals and groups in the school and wider community</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The capacity to have a more strategic influence on education – in my school and beyond</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The status and influence principals have in the community</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A desire for promotion after doing the same job for some time</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main reasons identified were:
- capacity to influence lives and learning of young people;
- capacity to have a more strategic influence on education; and,
- opportunity to work with diverse individuals and groups.

The potential status associated with the position of principal and a desire simply for promotion were rated the least important.

Respondents had the opportunity to add their own comments for this item. The following elaborate on the main reasons identified above.

*An educator is what I am by training and inclination. Principals have the capacity to influence education. I am at a point where I want to lead, not follow*  
*To be able to make a difference*

Respondents were asked to rate the level of importance of various factors that might act as positive influences (Table 5) and barriers (Table 6) for them in making a decision about seeking promotion to the principalship. These data are summarised below.

Table 5: The importance of particular factors acting as positive influences on decisions to seek promotion to the principalship in the future – (percentages are rounded)
The four main factors acting as potential incentives for those considering seeking promotion are:

- capacity to achieve work-life balance;
- school location acceptable to family;
- good work conditions; and,
- good remuneration.

These four could be clustered under two broader concepts of work-life balance and work conditions. Aspects related to professional learning opportunities once in the role or to any potential status one might attract in holding the role of principal rated the lowest.

Respondents had the opportunity to add their own comments regarding positive factors with regard to their seeking promotion. These tended to re-enforce the concepts noted above:

- *I would not consider the principalship until my children have completed secondary education.*

- *I feel the commitments one must make to do a good job in the role take far too much time away from my primary role as a mother. I deal with many under-parented children on a daily basis and I am determined that my children will not fall into this category.*

- *Work/life/family balance are critical to my decisions having been a principal and relinquishing to accept a deputy principal role.*

The comments also added important additional concepts relating to aspects of support one might seek/require once appointed to the principalship. That is, these aspirants identified that there would be on-going support/developmental needs once they had successfully been promoted – they realised at present that they were not necessarily fully prepared for the principalship. Mentoring and general support from colleagues and senior officers were featured here.

- *Good role models and capacity to be mentored by principal colleagues who are experienced and good at what they do.*

- *Support from personnel higher up the food chain when the hard calls are made. Student discipline in schools is becoming more difficult and parent reactions to decisions can sometimes be abusive and violent. Personal safety & support from superiors is a must.*
Table 6: The importance of particular factors that might act as barriers to respondents in seeking promotion to the principalship in the future – (percentages are rounded)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Very Important + Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High satisfaction in current role so little desire to change</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of the principal is too demanding with too much responsibility</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing work-life balance is easier in my current role</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My current role allows me closer contact with teaching &amp; learning &amp; classrooms</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of principal carries too much accountability</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extra remuneration is not worth the extra responsibilities and accountabilities</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The recruitment and selection process is biased and unfair, favouring certain applicants over others</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve tried promotion before and was rejected – I won’t wast my time again</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main factors acting as potential barriers are:
- work-life balance being easier to manage in (current) deputy principal position – extra remuneration as a principal is not worth the extra responsibilities;
- high satisfaction in current role – a role that allows closer contact with teaching and learning.

Other factors rated well by respondents related to the work-life balance factor above and the negative perceptions about the recruitment and selection process. What is significant here is that the aspirant deputy principals have perceptions of the principalship as a role different from their current one. It is seen as one characterised by impacting on their work-life balance, holding high responsibilities and accountabilities and moving them away from a teaching and learning focus.

Respondents had the opportunity to add their own comments regarding factors acting as potential barriers to their seeking promotion. These tended to re-enforce items already noted.

Principals are currently very exposed in their role. In my view they hold massive accountability and do not receive a great deal of support from District/Central Office. They are expected to implement systematic initiatives but have limited control over much of the implementation eg staff selection, funding allocations etc. when difficult issues arise.
District/Central Office is very keen to limit negative publicity and often relies on the principal to solve the problem

Principals I have known work tirelessly with little thanks, too smaller remuneration & little sleep due to the magnitude of the job.
The recruitment and selection process was also quite highly rated. It attracted many comments from respondents, many of whom suggested that the process was unfair for some and unclear for others.

Trying to understand the game. Shouldn't be a secret. Subjectivity is still a characteristic of the selection process- what one panel thinks is good another rejects (same person)

I have, as have many of my DP colleagues observed many anomalies in the selection processes throughout the state. Until the aspect of 'recruitment' is addressed by EQ ... many highly effective leaders will remain without principal opportunities

How to do it. Understanding the process. What panels are looking for. How to place myself in a position where I am considered to be a worthy applicant. How to get a mentor, sponsor who can advocate for me.

Finally, respondents were asked to provide (open-ended) comments about their views of the principal of the future. A number of comments raised concerns, at least among many of this potential aspirant group, that the role may become even more complex and challenging, particularly under the influence of increasing accountability and parental pressures.

I'd love to do it and see where it heads- I am interested and unsure as to what the role may look like. I fear further removed from the classroom moving towards a business manager promoting schools and accessing enrolments. Accountabilities will increase as more parenting and care providing roles enter the school domain. My greatest fear is the increased demand principals will have to seek from existing staff as budgets and staffing continue to be stretched.

Currently the negatives outweigh the positives. Remuneration is nor commensurate with responsibility. If principals are to be held accountable for the learning outcomes of their students they need to have a greater say in staffing

Looking ahead, one commented that the principal of the future.

Will need to be flexible and resilient. Will need support from employer. Will need to be mentally and physically healthy, a problem with many who get to the job

Another that:

There is a need to have a real understanding about how students learn and be open to new ideas and beliefs about this; be supportive of staff and the needs (physical and emotional) of staff and to have structures in place around these; be able to manage stress and keep a life balance that suits you personally (a need to be proactive about this).

Many others again raised issues surrounding work-life balance.

I aspire to be a principal but my family, lifestyle and personal well-being are paramount.

There is a perception in EQ that once you take on a principalship of a larger school in particular, your personal life is over. There is something wrong with the system we have created if we forsake our value of family balance etc that we as a profession espouse to become a person who models and operates falsely in this way.

Other comments were strongly positive about the role of principal, particularly with regard to having the opportunity to make a difference and do things better than others they had observed in the role of principal.
I aspire to this greatly. I have worked with too many principals previously who are not leaders. I believe I can achieve success as a principal.

A number of respondents identified their on-going learning and professional development as matters for consideration.

Many newly appointed principals lack relevant skills in financial management and other operational duties. A more intensive course for newly appointed principals or aspiring principals (current for 3 years) would ensure quality service. The development of new leaders should be seen as a worthwhile investment not a budgetary hindrance. The cost of unsatisfactory leadership in schools would outweigh the cost of providing better leadership development courses.

Training in specific areas such as financial requirements and leadership and change management should be automatic for anyone at DP level. Succession training should go with the role and be part of the ongoing work environment. The opportunity to trial the role is really valuable and for me removed the ‘fear factor’ of the role.

This rather long (edited) quote highlights some of the frustrations some in aspirant positions feel when they think about the principalship.

I see the role as little more than the middle man responsible for implementing each government's latest scheme ...each of which is poorly planned, poorly supported, but all coming attached with the label ‘it’s the school’s responsibility to make it work’. ... The principal bears all the responsibility with little authority or ability to influence the factors that contribute to the success or otherwise of the latest venture. As a DP I feel very lonely and detached from the system. You feel like the current priority of those in senior positions in the department is to ensure that nothing controversial happens and that schools maintain high School Opinion Survey Data. By doing this, it is more likely that their contracts will be renewed. This of course engenders a culture of ‘yes’ men who will always seek the path that involves the least ‘boat rocking’. There is also the de-humanizing detachment that makes you feel the role of District and Regional Offices is to watch and pounce on you if you make a mistake- you do not feel part of a bigger team. As a DP I have very little opportunity to access quality PD, and that that I have done I have had to pay for by myself. I have completed a masters degree in school administration completely in my own time and paid for by myself.

This final quote captures some of the mysteries, uncertainties and tensions many in the aspirational group feel:

I can't wait. But what's beyond that? With 20 years at least of my career before me know that within 8 I'll need to look beyond EQ for a challenge. Considering the fact that at that time I’ll have a few more lines in an era of youth adulation I'm starting to feel pressure to make the move away from the Department sooner rather than later. Whilst I try not to dwell on the negative and I know that if I have a performance/outcomes based track record I will eventually move on, I’m sometimes frustrated by closed networks that may have a different makeup to the ‘old boys club’ but still have the same powers of sanction and exclusion.

There may be some important messages here for senior departmental officers to reflect upon.

Summary and concluding comments

The findings reported here provide a valuable “first look” at some of the key aspects of aspirants’ views about the principalship available from the Aspiring Principals Questionnaire. As noted, both the analysis and (follow-up) research are on-going. For example, future analysis will examine
similarities/differences across the two sectors (primary and secondary), evidence of any gender differences and any particular trends in the data with respect to aspirant characteristics such as level of satisfaction in current role, current location with respect to school size and so on.

The research reported here adds valuable insights into a growing, albeit still small, pool of information available about what might be termed “next generation” school leaders. On a positive note, the vast majority of the 146 respondent deputy principals (and equivalent) from across Queensland state primary and secondary schools are satisfied in their current position. Despite this, many of them think about doing another job. For some, this is in the principalship as over half indicate they will seek promotion in the future. For the education system which can be expected to look to this group of middle-level school leaders as the promotional pool for the principalship in the future, this ought provide some encouragement. From policy and practice perspectives, the system’s current intentions to provide such aspirants with targeted professional development is to be lauded. Such positive support and encouragement may well counter, at least in part, the response of about half of this respondent group who indicate they think about working in roles not in schools or education. This group represents a leakage of potential aspirants from the pool of next generation school leaders.

The view of the respondents that they would like to see the principal’s role focusing more on strategic and educational/curriculum leadership and less on operational matters, management and administration is significant and is consistent with what principals themselves say about the reality of their roles (Blackmore et al, 2005; Cranston et al, 2003). Much of the contestation principals feel in managing increasing systemic and local accountability demands shapes as a key driver in just what principals want, can and actually do as principals. There are clearly elements of Gronn’s (2003) notion of “greedy work” at play here, such that there are some real policy and practice implications evident as there may need to be a more rigorous investigation of alternative conceptualisations of the principalship for the future (Blackmore et al, 2005; Gronn, 2003).

In considering any such re-conceptualisation, a number of issues emerge as requiring close attention. Work-life balance continues as a dominant struggle for principals against a backdrop of intensification their roles (Thomson et al, 2003), at least in the eyes of these aspirants as they observe their principals first-hand. Tied up with this is accepting a principal’s position in a school suitable for the aspirant’s family, a parallel notion of seeing family and work as interdependent, and not independent. Issues of work conditions and remuneration are also factors for consideration here. Limerick et al’s (2002) notion of “lifestreaming” emerges as a critical factor for consideration (pp. 130-131).

The reasons deputy principals identify as influencing them to aspire to the principalship are based on what might be considered desirable and positive education principles. These include wanting to influence the lives and learning of young people. Such notions ought be seen as positives for both the system and schools as they indicate they are looking to the principalship for the “right reasons”. The struggle at play, however, is to try to catalyse such notions into practice and not allow them to be swamped by the accountability and managerial demands already noted. It is that focus on school and educational leadership and the positive impact on young people that must be seen by these aspirants as real possibilities were they to become principals. Indeed, many see their current role as a deputy providing greater opportunities for staying connected with the classroom and teaching and learning than might be the case for principals – this possible distancing from teaching and learning is seen as a potential disincentive for some in seeking promotion (Cranston et al, 2004). In seeing school and educational leadership as key goals one might strive for in the principalship, these deputy principals identify strong interpersonal and people skills, visioning and inspiring change among the school community and acting ethically and fairly as key capabilities principals would need to hold to make them a reality. Importantly, many identify learning and professional development needs to achieve these, noting mentoring and observing quality principals as means to achieving this.

There is clearly some optimism in the data examined thus far in this research as we look toward our “next generation” school leaders. In particular, there appears to be a potential aspirant principal pool who express strong educational drivers as the main incentives that might see them applying for
principal positions in the future. This optimism, however, needs to be balanced by a level of pessimism about promotion, underpinned by concerns about work-life balance and work intensification for principals deriving in part from the dominant accountability and managerial demands on principals at the moment. The policy and practice responses to these issues are still in but an embryonic state. Research such as that reported here can continue to make a contribution in this regard. The final word, capturing some of the tensions noted in this paper, is left to one of the deputy principals in this study.

Unless more is understood about the complexity of the role of leaders in schools by those making decisions relating to what schools ‘will’ do, fewer people will see the role as attractive.

References


Appendix 1: Framework for the Aspiring Principals’ Questionnaire (APQ)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 1</th>
<th>Background information</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your current school:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o current location; school type, size</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You as a school leader:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Gender, age, experience as an educator, formal qualifications; current professional development; overall satisfaction with current role</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 2</th>
<th>Views &amp; characteristics of current role</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hours worked, pressure, variety &amp; diversity re current role</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changes in these in recent years; factors for these changes</td>
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<td>Preferences for other roles</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 3</th>
<th>Career, planning, future</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promotion to principalship – past, future plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Factors positively influencing decision about promotion to principalship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Factors negatively (barriers) influencing decision about promotion to principalship</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>Section 4</th>
<th>Perceptions about the principalship</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reasons for seeking principalship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>perceptions about the roles of principals (leadership, management aspects) – real v ideal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>key forces acting on the principalship today – barriers to achieving ideal role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Capabilities of the principalship – required, personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional development to develop required capabilities</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 5</th>
<th>Values: self, organisational</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Values beliefs, principles – personal/self &amp; organisational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Section 6</th>
<th>General comments (open-ended)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being a principal in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Any other comments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

39 closed items  
2 open-ended items  
11 of the closed items allow opportunity to add open-ended comments