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Why would anybody want this job? The challenge of attracting and sustaining effective leaders for Australian schools



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Abstract

Over the past decade, there has been considerable concern about an impending crisis in school leadership due to a shrinking pool of applicants for principals' positions. This paper explores the dimensions of this issue in Australia and identifies possible reasons for a decline in interest in principalship. It concludes with ideas and directions for policy reform.

'What are we doing that people are really not interested in this job?'

Senior member of an Australian religious order on the difficulty of recruiting school principals, quoted in Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei (2003)

Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been considerable concern in Australia about an impending crisis in school leadership. In 2001, Brian Caldwell (2000) observed that 'reports from nation after nation refer to the shrinking pool of applicants for the principalship'. The Australian College of Educators says, 'It is becoming increasingly difficult to attract leaders to the principalship' (ACE, 2006). Officials in several education departments in Australian states and territories also report a declining number of applications for principal vacancies (Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003; Lacey, 2002).

This paper explores the dimensions of the crisis in school leadership in Australia, examining trends such as a shrinking pool of applicants for principal positions and suggestions of a decline in the 'quality' of potential applicants. We then examine the possible reasons for the declining interest in the principalship

and discuss directions for policy reform to address this issue.

A declining pool of applicants

There are many published studies that suggest a decline in the number of applications for school principals' positions in Australia and overseas (cited in Lacey 2002, and Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003). But quantitative evidence to suggest a 'shrinking pool of applicants' for the principalship in Australia is limited. Work by the Catholic Education Commission of New South Wales suggested that fewer people were applying for principals' positions (d'Arbon, Duignan & Duncan, 2002) but their observations were not well supported by evidence. The survey conducted among potential school principals¹ within the Catholic Education system in New South Wales found that 52 per cent of all respondents indicated they were not seeking a principal's position and did not intend to apply, 30 per cent said they were willing to apply while 16 per cent were unsure. Moreover, of the 300 assistant principals who responded, only 30 per cent said they were unwilling to apply, 45 per cent were willing to apply and the remaining 25 per cent were unsure (d'Arbon, Duignan & Duncan 2002). In Victoria, a study of leadership aspirations among government school teachers suggested that 24 per cent of teachers had leadership aspirations that extended to the principal class (Lacey, 2002).

In the absence of comparative data from previous decades, we cannot be sure what level of interest constitutes a decline in school leadership applications in Australia. Does a 20–30 per cent

¹ The survey recipients were some 3000 Assistant Principals, Subject Co-ordinators and Religious Education Co-ordinators in the 588 Catholic schools throughout New South Wales, of whom 1024 replied (a response rate of 30 per cent).

level of interest in applying for the job of principal (i.e. 30 per cent of Catholic teachers and 24 per cent of state school teachers) constitute evidence of an impending shortage of applicants? Barty et al. (2005) conclude that the results of both surveys 'seemed a little too high to indicate a critical decline in interest in the principalship'. An American study of the attributes and career paths of school principals in New York State came to a similar conclusion. It found that although up to 60 per cent of current principals may retire over the next five years, the number of individuals under the age of 45 and 'certified' to be principals exceeded the number of principalships by more than 50 per cent (Papa, Lankford & Wyckoff, 2002).

Large-scale quantitative studies may not be adequate to convey the complexity of this issue, as the level of interest in applying for principal's positions appears to differ between schools. A qualitative study of the supply of school principals in South Australia and Victoria concluded that the route to becoming a principal varies by type of school. The study found that some schools have fewer applicants for the principalship than other schools, and identified the many local and contextual factors that influenced the number of applications. Factors such as the location of the school and its student population influence the number of applications for principals' positions, as well as 'local knowledge' about other staff who are applying for particular jobs (Barty et al, 2005). Variation in the level of interest in particular types of school is also evident in other countries. In Austria, the government reports difficulties in attracting applicants to principalships in rural and remote schools (Schratz & Petzold, 2007). An American study measuring the level of interest among assistant principals in applying for different types of schools found that schools with low levels of student

achievement were less attractive than more high-achieving schools. The authors concluded that low-performing schools were 'greatly disadvantaged in recruiting school principals' (Winter & Morgenthal, 2002).

In summary, many Australian researchers maintain that the number of applicants for the principalship is declining. While admitting that 'data on the principal aspirant pool, both current and prospective, are often difficult to obtain', Peter Gronn and Karin Rawlings-Sanaei concluded on the basis of enquiries of Australian state and territory education departments, that there was an 'indicative rather than a definitive, picture of principal shortages' in many jurisdictions (2003). But to the extent that there is a problem with the future supply of educational leaders, it is important to acknowledge that the level of interest in the principalship varies between schools, with some types of school, such as rural schools and schools with lower levels of student achievement, appearing less attractive to potential applicants than others.

The quality of the pool of applicants

Reports of a declining level of interest in applying for the position of school principal also suggest that there is a decline in the 'quality' of applicants (see ASPA 1999, Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003). The concept of 'quality' in teaching and school leadership is highly contested and the available measures of 'quality' are quite narrow. For example, using the two measures of years of experience and the status of the college from which principals received their Bachelors degrees, an American study found that the urban schools within New York City were much more likely to have less experienced principals and principals who received their degrees from lower ranked colleges than schools in suburban districts. Within New York City, schools where students

performed poorly on standardised exams were also more likely to have less experienced principals and principals who received their degrees from lower ranked colleges (Papa, Lankford & Wyckoff, 2002).

In Australia, factors such as years of experience and the status of one's tertiary institution would not necessarily be seen as legitimate measures of leadership quality. We therefore must rely on the qualitative evidence gathered by Peter Gronn from educational administrators and members of selection panels on school boards, which suggests a 'diminution of the numbers of candidates deemed worthy of short-listing for interview' (Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003). It is possible that evidence of lower levels of interest in the principalship in particular schools does mean less competition for such positions and therefore might imply that the successful applicants do not possess the 'qualities' of those who would have succeeded in a more highly contested process. On the other hand, there is debate about the extent to which current selection processes work to identify the best person for the principalship (Blackmore, Thomson & Barty, 2006). Overall, it is likely that the quality of applicants, like the number of applicants, will vary according to the characteristics of individual schools (Papa, Lankford & Wyckoff, 2002; Barty et al. 2005; Winter & Morgenthal, 2002).

Reasons for a decline in interest in the principalship

The total number of schools in Australia has remained roughly the same over the past 30 years, whereas the size of the teaching workforce has increased by over a third (ABS Catalogue No. 4221.0). This would imply that there are ample numbers of potential applicants for leadership positions. But it is possible that principals are retiring at a faster rate,

due to the effect of the post-war baby boom and thereby creating more vacancies. In 2003, more than half the teaching workforce was over 45 years of age and an increasing number of teachers and principals were expected to retire by 2010 (MCEETYA, 2004). Another impetus to early retirement in some jurisdictions was superannuation schemes that provided an incentive to retire at 54 years and 11 months (Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003). Another socio-demographic factor that should be taken into account is the rise in two-career families. Research suggests that adults in dual-career families employ a range of adaptive strategies at different stages of their lifespan to attain work-life balance, that influence both their individual career aspirations and labour market mobility (Becker & Moen, 1999).

If the job of school principal has become more demanding and stressful, this knowledge could be deterring potential applicants from applying for the principalship, and may also account for their different levels of interest in applying for positions in particular types of school. A major Victorian government study on principals' workload and its impact on health and well-being found 78 per cent of principals and assistant principals reporting 'high' or 'very high' levels of work-related stress, compared to 55 per cent of white collar workers in comparable occupations. While the respondents reported an almost universal 'love' for their job (90 per cent agreeing with the statement 'my job gives me great satisfaction'), the sheer volume of work was regarded as the biggest source of stress. There was a clear tension between the desire to be an 'educational leader' versus the demand to be a 'manager'. While over 90 per cent of respondents preferred to think of themselves as 'mainly an educational leader', only 20 per cent said that this was the reality, and that

they were 'mainly a manager'. Sixty per cent of principals said that they spent 'too much' time on accountability and 72 per cent agreed that the worst thing about their job was 'the amount of unnecessary paper work' (DET, 2004).

These findings are consistent with several studies of the changing role of school principals in Western countries. Major changes in the role of school principal over the past two decades are identified as increased local site management, including global budgeting in some jurisdictions; increased accountability requirements from employing authorities, particularly in the domain of student achievement; altered relationships with the school community, partly influenced by increased school choice; and a general increase in time allocated to management and paperwork compared to time spent on educational leadership (Whitaker, 2003; Gronn, 2003; Stevenson, 2006; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, 2005).

Peter Gronn concludes that school leadership has been reconstructed as a form of 'greedy work', defined as 'a type of occupational servitude in which the expectations and demands on leaders have become all-consuming' (Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003). He argues that the lack of interest in the principalship is the product of a widespread 'disengagement' with school leadership due to the infiltration of a new paradigm of governance that emphasises accountability through school-level performance outcomes.

For teachers and administrators to submit themselves to the effort norms and expectations of performance enshrined in institutional charters, employment contracts, personal productivity targets etc ... demands the exertion of previously undreamt of levels of physical, cognitive and emotional energy expenditure. At the same time as these role demands and associated expectations for teachers

and school leaders have increased, the scope for institutional level autonomy and discretion, promised by such initiatives as school-level budgeting, has often been severely circumscribed by externally imposed fiscal and resource constraints

Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei 2003

Hargreaves and Fink (2003, 2005) also argue that much of recent educational reform has been unsustainable, in the sense that it has had an overall negative effect on the individuals and systems that it aimed to assist.

The past decade and more has seen the educational reform and standards movement plummet to the depths of unsustainability, taking educational leadership with it. The constructive and compelling idea of standards – that learning comes before teaching and that we should be able to know and demonstrate when learning has occurred – has degenerated into a compulsive obsession with standardization.

Hargreaves & Fink 2005

A way forward

Governments have responded to the perceived crisis in school leadership in Australia in a number of ways, primarily by focusing on building 'capacity' within the existing teaching force, through programs to identify and support potential school leaders early in their teaching careers. But these initiatives may not be enough. It has been pointed out that the aspirations of the new generation of recruits to the teaching profession could be different from those of the previous generation. The cohort of 'Generation Xers' are likely to be more 'outwardly' rather than 'upwardly' mobile, with a preference for keeping their life options open rather than committing themselves to one particular career path (Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003).

Using the concept of sustainability from the environment movement, Hargreaves and Fink argue that

fundamental cultural change is necessary to reform the institution of school leadership in the 21st century. They propose that sustainable leadership in education should be a shared responsibility that does not unduly deplete human or financial resources, nor exert damage on the surrounding educational environment and school community. The concept of sustainability 'is basically concerned with developing and preserving what matters, spreads and lasts in ways that create positive connections and development among people and do no harm to others in the present or the future' (Hargreaves & Fink 2005).

Hargreaves and Fink offer seven principles of sustainability that should guide and underpin educational change and leadership:

- 1 Depth – the moral purpose of fostering deep and broad learning within relationships of abiding care for others
- 2 Length – succession planning to preserve and advance value over time
- 3 Breadth – no one leader or institution should control everything; distributed leadership
- 4 Justice – does no harm to and actively improves the surrounding environment; shares knowledge and resources; does not prosper at another school's expense
- 5 Diversity – promotes diversity and learns from diversity; creates cohesion and networking among richly varied components
- 6 Resourcefulness – develops and does not deplete material and human resources; takes care of its leaders by making sure they take care of themselves; renews people's energy; wastes neither money nor people

- 7 Conservation – honors and learns from the past to create an even better future; revisits and revives organisational memory; moves beyond the best of the past.

Hargreaves & Fink 2005, pp. 19–20

Conclusion

This paper has examined the evidence from various sources about an impending crisis in school leadership due to a decline in the number of interested and suitable applicants for principals' positions. Evidence suggests that there is a decline in the pool of potential applicants for the principalship, but that the level of interest in the position is also influenced by the characteristics of individual schools. The level of stress reported by principals and assistant principals could be a major deterrent to the pool of potential applicants for leadership positions. There is compelling evidence that the role of school principals has changed over the past two decades with increased expectations of management at the expense of educational leadership. Fundamental policy reform may be necessary to make educational leadership sustainable in the future.

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