

DEBORAH TOWNS

3. WOMEN PRINCIPALS

Voices in Non-Government Schools

The voices of fourteen women school principals are presented in this chapter. In our conversations with them, they were invited to describe and reflect upon their roles as leaders of successful non-government schools. The chapter begins with a description of their contributions and work settings. It then explores three issues, the first being why leading a school has been important to them. The second was how they have developed their leadership base so they could be influential in their school. The fourth issue addressed challenges they may have had which prevented them from exercising influence including issues of gender. Like the previous one, this chapter is designed to present the women's voices with a minimum of interpretation by the author. Quotations presented for each theme are from different women.

ROLES AND WORK SETTINGS

The principals we interviewed were leading either very large schools of around 2000 students (plus staff) or of medium-size (around 800 students plus staff). All these schools, involving multi-million budgets, are non-government schools. Most are single sex girls' schools, while three others are co-educational. Most of them led schools which included early learning centres for pre-school age children and every level through to Year 12.

Most of their schools had begun as small private establishments established by women over a century ago. Others were established by religious or community organisations. In drawing attention to this history, one principal remarked: "How many businesses today are 114 years old?"

The girls-only schools belong to the Australasian Alliance of Girls' Schools (AAGS) which is a strong advocate of single-sex schools as providing the best learning environment for girls. All these schools emphasise the provision of leadership programs for their students. The principals belong to the Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (AHISA), and other national, state and local professional organisations.

All principals were appointed through their school's council, although formal arrangements governing their working relationships with councils varied. However, all principals have the power to hire and fire. A few of the schools are multi-campus and provide boarding facilities, and all have international students and provide international exchanges. These are schools that have high public

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profiles, very sophisticated marketing strategies and websites, and high standard facilities for teaching, sport and a range of cultural and other activities, in beautifully tended settings. As school principals they are leaders of large numbers of teaching and other professional staff as well as administrative and support teams. Many of those we interviewed have post-graduate qualifications.

The principals described themselves as educational leaders or the “leading educator” as one described herself, while most also described themselves as Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). All spoke about the need to hold the tension between the demands of contemporary business management and the purpose, timeframes and traditions of educational institutions. They also described the classic executive challenges of constantly shifting attention between long term vision and planning, and day-to-day issues of implementation and change. They talked about dealing with multiple stakeholders both within and beyond the school community, including its governing body, parents, regulators, professional bodies, as well as international and local markets and communities. One commented that “you have to be all things to all people”. For this woman in a larger co-educational school, being principal is:

... both to be an educational leader, and, a business head ... to be the CEO of the organisation. Certainly during most of my time as the Principal, the area of being the educational leader has predominated.

However, there has always been a pressing need to have some involvement in, and certainly cognisance of, the business side; so, as the Principal, and as an educational leader, you are the one who is setting educational directions with the staff, working with them to develop educational priorities, then enacting those educational priorities and ensuring that they can be met through the budget.

Then there is a lot of day to day stuff in terms of involvement with students. A role model, really, for heads of school and for other senior leaders in the school on how to interact with students, how to interact with parents and there is also the industrial relations side of it ...

(On the school council) I am a non-elected member and a non-voting member, but I think that the Principal has a very significant role in influencing the School Council or Board because ... certainly the President and the other members of the Board look to the Principal to say what it is, to be setting that direction and to be arguing for it, advocating for it ...

A principal in a smaller school saw it this way:

And I quite like having the responsibility of the, you know, educational leader as well as the corporate leader ... in that sense but we are a school first and a business second. That is kind of how I see it. You know, I have, people call me the Principal mostly but sometimes I get CEO and I like to think of that as Chief Encouragement Officer.

Others elaborated on varied dimensions of the role:

The management responsibilities specifically ... if we consider a flow chart of the school with lines of reporting and responsibilities of other people ... I basically have oversight of the whole school but I have people in positions of responsibility with delegated authority for the roles that they need to carry out.

At the same time, I have regular reporting from them to maintain oversight concerning completion of the job, standard of the jobs etc. ... the first line down is to my Deputy Principal and Business Manager and then a group that totals seven in number that makes up the senior executive of the school and it includes deans of studies and students, the curriculum and pastoral care arms of the school and heads of campus of junior school and year 9, which we have (on a separate campus), and the Chaplain is part of this too.

So they are (all) quite critical as far as my management is concerned. That senior structure within the school ... is the managing of areas that I have under directive positions: the IT servicing of the school, the learning technologies area and the information resourcing of the school. They are three very, very big areas for us. And then my management role then filters through those people to other layers.

So, for example, heads of department, coordinators of year levels, the Junior School Head take responsibility for oversight of class teachers there but reports through to me and then, of course, there is the, through the Dean of Students with pastoral care, there is the whole oversight of students in that area and oversight of what is happening in the curriculum and teaching and learning. So, professional learning, I have oversight as well but through those key wonderful staff members that I have. And then the other part of the management would be of parents. That extended community and that ... layer of communicating and accountability basically is to the parents of the children.

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I am on the Board ex officio and as the Business Manager as well. I do very detailed reporting through to the Board ... I suppose how I manage the school helps the Board and informs them with what they are doing and so there is, I mean they are responsible for policy. A lot of it though comes from my feedback to them.

So the discussions we have are quite critical with where they see the policies of the school going. So it is almost a guiding role upwards and an informing role upwards that is quite critical. So we are looking then at the future directions of the school and including programs plus property development.

The Principal of the largest school in the study, with approximately 2,000 students and almost 1,000 staff, included in her role:

... the oversight of the education and the wellbeing of the students and staff in the college and ... also the oversight of the financial, business, side of the school as well. We also have here ... remote sites, so our education isn't just limited to the one site.

We also have a boarding house on site so my responsibility extends as far as residential programs too. So there is, if you like, many compliance issues, and you know compliance is such a big part of our role too, ensuring that we do have the processes in place and that we are adequately fulfilling those roles.

The principal role's responsibilities have shifted in recent years according to many of the participants to a greater involvement in engaging and directly working with the school community. This was explained by one principal in a medium sized girls' school:

I think that the leadership of teaching and learning is becoming a far more prominent focus for principals ... as part of the movement of general educational reform, prominence in terms of improving pedagogy in a school ... and leading teachers in terms of professional development. I think once upon a time it was a lower level kind of role where, certainly I have spoken to principals and they said they spent 50 per cent of their time working to council, school council instructions on managing budgets and administration.

... So there is a bit of polarising, too, because we are becoming far more accountable. So there are just far more ways in which we have to report to government or to other bodies such as the VRQA and so on.

And really, I see my role as providing the right environment for great learning and growth to occur. So that is resourcing, it is removing obstacles. It is providing a compelling vision. It is encouraging people to know that, you know, while at times the work may be really hard, it is still worthwhile. And that they are part of something bigger.

THE DRIVE TO LEAD A SCHOOL

Leadership of a school was a long standing and clearly defined goal for some of the women we interviewed, but not always actively sought by others. Regardless of this difference, most of these women described the importance of networks and collegiate relationships in facilitating appointments as school boards and head hunting companies searched for the best ‘fit’ for particular schools. One woman described this process in action:

I am not an ambitious person ... I have never plotted out that I am going to be a school principal. When I became a deputy principal I sort of grew into that job because of other things I was doing.

So I went from Head of History to Year Level Coordinator to Director of Staff to Deputy Principal. And then I sort of moved sideways (to another school) ... to do this staff development role because it interested me. I took a pay cut and went sideways. And then I saw the job ... because I always look at the Saturday Age, just to have a look at what is happening, not necessarily for me, but you know, I still look.

You know which schools are still advertising, who has had a surprise resignation because they are advertising late, you know. But I didn't apply for this job. And then I got a call from a friend of mine who said, I have just been rung by the search company ... and I have given them your name but they can't contact you because of (particular protocols) ... So if you are interested you are going to have to give them a call ... And I gave them a call and ... I was offered the job after a couple of chats and a couple of meetings in front of a panel. And here I am.

Another principal, who had clear ambitions for the role, was invited by the school she was already working in to apply:

I was invited to apply for many principal's jobs and I waited for an invitation that was the right alignment for me ... and that is my advice to some of the young educators I mentor. That, you know, if you are aspirational, you have the skills, you have the

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talent, you are putting in all the work, it should be about going to the right school with the right agenda for you. And ... that match in not only your leadership style but your leadership interests is very important.

Similarly, for another:

It was about fit. This school is a good cultural fit for me. My advice for applicants is to make sure if you get an interview that you give the answers that are your own and not what you think the panel wants to hear. My Principal was looking for principal jobs for me and he said that this is a good one for you so I applied and here I am.

However, I was not and never have been ambitious. I was the head prefect at school. Later, I would notice in meetings that there were better ways of doing things and would point it out. I travelled and worked overseas. I could not get work as a teacher in the UK but got work in a science museum and after seven years I was the Director. It was a business environment but a not-for-profit organisation.

Some were previously principals of other schools and applied for their current schools because they liked what they had heard about the school. For one woman a “number of factors came together” when she applied for her current school.

A colleague told me the job was coming up and so then, yes, I applied. In terms of my ability, you know I think you learn as you go. You learn on the job but also I attend to my professional development and so on. So I do read, I do think about current educational thinking. I am involved in other bodies outside the school, so you know I was involved in a consultative group with Australian Institute of Teaching and school leadership, with a heads association and so I know sort of what is current in the scene.

For many of the women being a principal was seen as giving them greater opportunities to be an influential educational and business leader, and to fulfil their belief that they could make a difference.

I did seven years training for this job. I was seven years as a deputy headmistress in a leading girl's school in Sydney, an independent girls' school. And in those seven years it informed and encouraged my aspiration to be a principal because I understood that whilst I could do many things as a deputy headmistress, most remained operationally influential rather than politically influential.

And so I had a desire to contribute more significantly to the education of girls but hopefully more broadly, the education of children in Australia.

Early in another woman's career she decided that ...

... the opportunity to be a principal was never going to come my way. But I didn't want to ... at that stage, I thought oh, who would want that job? I mean seriously, you would have to be mad.

However, almost a decade ago she began her current principal position in a medium sized Prep to Year 12 girls' school. In this role she can influence not only the school's development but also national educational development:

And I felt that I not only needed to gain that position of principal to allow me to use that as a platform if you like, but being a principal would also bring me other opportunities for growth and development that hopefully would inform my capacity and grow my capacity for influence. And since coming into the role I have had several exciting opportunities to be involved in national conversations around education and I have appreciated that. I have grown from that and I hope that my voice is making some impact.

But education is a business where influence is over the long haul. It rarely happens in one episode. Um, and at a national level where really the locus of control now is in terms of the big agendas for education we are at the mercy of political parties.

For another:

In terms of being a principal, the point is you can have maximum impact. You know, as a deputy you are answerable to other people and you have a portfolio but your impact is limited. Whereas as a principal, both in making your own decisions but also in working with others, you can transform a school so that is a sort of journey I have been on to change the ethos of the school.

To build student pride in the school ... to turn around its finances and enrolments, to change the outlook. So the girls themselves through learning Asian languages, through being exposed to different cultures, see themselves not only as citizens of Melbourne, or Australia, but global citizens. So that is really the task that I have set myself.

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I really felt the desire to be instrumental in making a learning environment that was fair and supportive for children because they are so often powerless and I had witnessed, very often, as a student, and, then, a parent, the powerlessness of children, and I think that a major part of our role is to empower them, to give them the tools to enable them to be the powerful change agents in their life. And, I think that is pretty important because that is a life skill. Because ... in the end you don't always succeed, and sometimes things go on being unfair. But you give it a jolly good go. ...

Young people are so incredibly vulnerable and they are an enormous responsibility ... and now that I have grandchildren of my own, and I realise they are so precious and fragile, particularly adolescents. I know that sounds funny. Most people say to me, oh, you know the littlies are so cute; yeah the littlies are cute, but the adolescents are too ... I think it is about, I think it's about profound respect.

She considered her encouraging role incorporated the “school community” which included students, staff and parents.

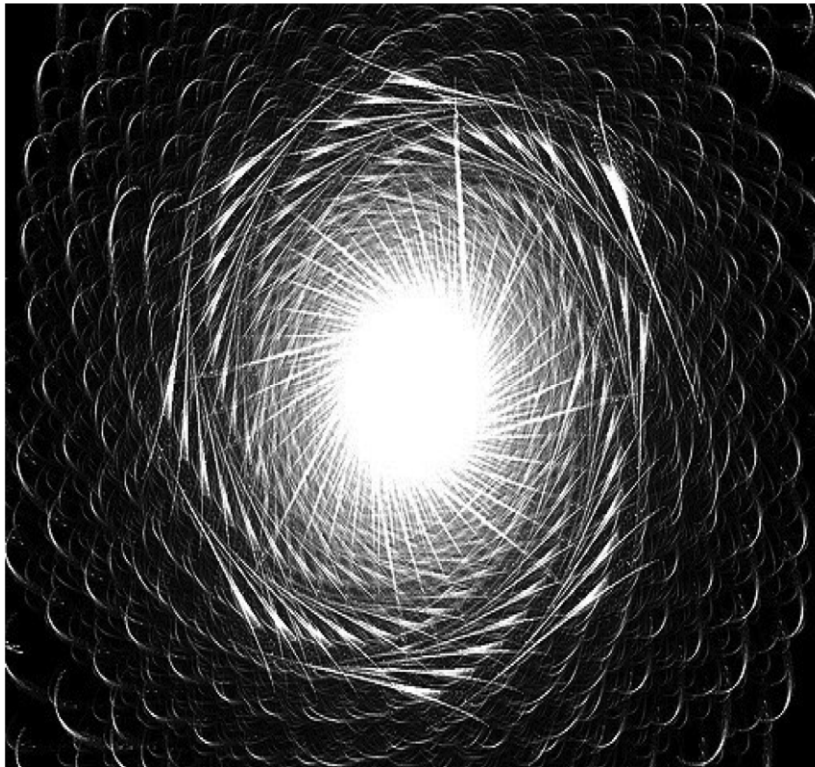
It is kind of a privilege and a challenge to, you know, to support young people as they grow, as they learn. So I think you need a lot of encouragement to do that and persevere with it. And be a good role model for them. ...

And really, I see my role as providing the right environment for great learning and growth to occur. So that is resourcing, it is removing obstacles. It is providing a compelling vision. It is encouraging people to know that, you know, while at times the work may be really hard, it is still worthwhile. And that they are part of something bigger.

STRATEGIES FOR BEING AN INFLUENTIAL LEADER

As appointed principals of significant schools, these women all had formal mandates to lead and to exert influence in a variety of domains, as we have seen. Exploring the way, they chose to take up their authority was a key purpose of our conversations with them. The participating women principals were all articulate about their influencing behaviours and how they adapted their approaches according to the particular aims and circumstances they faced. At the time they were interviewed, some had been principals for more than a decade and had been principals of other schools, while some were in the first year in that role.

Common to all was that they had participated in leadership programs, had led a range of activities within schools and community organisations over time, and had observed other principals' leadership practice. The nuanced language used when describing their leadership work reflects many years of deliberately thinking and reading about it, discussing it with other principals at professional meetings and conferences, and talking directly to their students and other stakeholders about its importance.



Though they were leaders of businesses, with hundreds of staff (one had a thousand staff) they framed the heart of their work in terms of educational goals and their students' welfare. As we have seen, they saw themselves as "learning leaders" providing a learning environment which was happy and productive, and in most cases carried cherished values into a twenty-first century context. Many of their schools retain their original motto which could be over a century old. At the same time, these principals pursued successful learning outcomes as a key source of competitive advantage.

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One principal wanted to radically change the school for what she believed were educationally sound reasons while keeping the school financially viable during the global financial crisis (GFC). It was a difficult time and some independent schools closed. Upon her arrival at the school she found that the school might not be viable in the following five years and convinced the school community that they had to do something else to “keep this school”.

I got a consultant in ... we had a series of focus groups of parents and students and staff about what they value about the school, what are the core things they want to value. We surveyed every parent. We surveyed all our Year 12 students. We surveyed all our staff to say what the things were.

And it actually threw up some quite confronting things for the Board to hear. It threw up the key items the school valued and we said we had to take the core essence of what the school valued about the school and reframe it for the next, you know, 50 years.

We came up with a visionary statement from the school going forward. So I suppose you talk about influential leadership, one is convincing the Board we had to do something significant, something different for the long-term future of the school. And then, getting, capturing what the essence was of the school and how we could restructure it for the long-term future of the school. So we have actually sold (one of the school's sites) ... selling that land must have been scary because it is opposite to what I think every other school is doing.

Another principal who had studied and worked directly in developing leadership programs in schools before she took up a principal role was “really attracted to the notion that you lead so that people you are leading think they have actually done the things themselves”. She explained:

You have to walk the talk ... and that is often a challenge ... But I don't ask anyone to do anything that I won't do myself so if, for example, we have someone who does bus duty for us, we had a woman who was ill for a long period of time, I did bus duty. And I did it every night for a month and I have been the lollipop lady and have got out in the middle of the road with my big orange stick and, you know I will do some classroom extras because I know teachers hate doing those. I think it is really important.

So I don't set myself up as some, you know holier than thou kind of leader, and I don't think leaders who do are very impressive at all. It is really important that people feel comfortable coming into my office and feel that they can come and see me anytime.

So, you know, if that door over there is open it means, and it is only closed when someone is in here with me, then anyone can come in and have a chat about anything. I would like to think that people saw me as approachable. Kids as well. And parents. So that is really important.

In a smaller school, another principal had a similar opinion

Well, I know this is going to sound bizarre but I don't think I am any more important than the man who, you know, sweeps the paths in this school. So I would say all the staff are my peers.

I know I have got more responsibility and I know I report to a board and they don't, so ultimately in terms of the board, you know, the principal is the person who actually has to do a report and answer board questions. But I guess, I guess in a school like this, it is not particularly hierarchical ... though I meet weekly with our management team ... which includes the Business Manager, the Deputy Head of School, and Head of Senior School.

Another went into a long established school as a “new broom”. She had found in schools that the brighter ones always did well and the weaker ones were helped along the way but the middle band were not being supported as much as they could be. She went into classes and saw that teaching could be changed by “influencing kids to believe that they could do better”. It is important that we have an open and honest dialogue.

A first time principal explained how she went about change in her first year:

... there are things that are just set and we do things this way because that is the way we do them. And obviously I wanted to make some changes to this place. But I know enough about leadership to know that it is not wise to go in and start ... by slashing and burning so to speak. So you go very gently over a period of time.

So, let me see, one of the things that I do almost immediately ... I did here was I closed a site that was operating as an IT centre ... It was incredibly expensive ... it just didn't work. It was really easy because there were no educational benefits for the children. And there were no benefits for the school. So when I closed that I didn't say to anyone what do you think, I just went to the Board and said, this is a disaster.

So now if I look at something that required getting people on side ... when I came here they had, they had these little personal development lessons and then they had Religious Education

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lessons. And you know they were disjointed and I thought we could do a whole lot better. And in my view RE and Personal Development are pretty much the same thing, or you know. I mean all the world's major religions are on about how you treat people and how you relate to one another and that should be the basis of personal development. So we rolled the RE and Personal Development into one. So every student from Prep to 12 does these lessons.

I am a great believer in putting something on the table when you go to a meeting. When you have a good idea. Never go in with a blank page.

And so I implemented lots of things that wouldn't have been seen as directly influencing that but things that I did and said in assembly, speakers got in, some work I did with staff ... I sometimes teach in the classrooms ... we have ended up with a (consistent) trajectory. Over seven years it has gone steadily up.

Some principals described interventions that required particular sensitivity:

Our Business Manager (BM), who is a very sort of "crash through" style of person, has been laying down the law to the heads of school, about how vigilant they need to be next year about their budgets. So, one of the heads of school wrote back and pointed out that he was being expected to cut back a greater percentage than he was told earlier by the BM. That head of school copied me in, so, clearly he is asking for my support in some way.

So, I went to the Business Manager, well, I emailed the Business Manager, and I said, look, is this accurate? Well, the guy (who had written to me) had "the wrong end of the stick".

(The Business Manager was unhappy initially with the Principal's questioning him). So, I did two things: I wrote back to him and I also copied in the School Council President; but I also went to see him. I wrote back and said, my role as Senior Education Officer, my concern is to educate this person to come along with us on this budget decision. And, if there is an issue of factual inaccuracy, then it needs to be addressed because otherwise we can't take that person with his heart and mind, we can only wield a "big stick". I don't believe that is very effective.

... so I need you to give me the data, because if it needs to be explicated so that this person understands it, then so be it. That's the way to get the compliance. He was pretty unhappy with that, but ultimately he came around, so that when we had the meeting

with the heads of school,, actually his tone was much more conciliatory and reasonable ... So, instead of being crashed through, he talked about, you know, why this needs to be happening here and there.

Others described spending considerable time influencing and developing the insight and capability of their most senior staff so that they could more fully share the difficult leadership work that needed to be done:

So, it was really about starting to share ... an issue such as too many staff and (we) could not afford them, that I was working on but I wanted to give them a bit more information because I could see a time in the future where I would need their input as well. So really, the first period of time was an exercise in helping to bring them up to speed but also with individuals, discussing it a little bit more so they could see how it was related to their work.

I probably spent a fair bit of time on it because that was the time when I had to present the information a couple of times in a different way to convince some people that it really was an issue and that was a time that I did meet with some people individually as part of a normal meeting structure about putting it on the agenda one to one.

Looking at competitor information that we get and just in terms of our own financials, it was very, very obvious. But you know, this person (Business Manager) actually had a lot of influence with department heads.

So I challenged him to ask me questions and to, you know, challenge, challenge it and that was a good thing to do with him because in the end I needed him to deliver some messages. I spent about six months, if you like, preparing people for the discussions that we had to have. And getting the facts as well.

Other principals also expressed the need to work in a similar way:

My philosophy is that you need people to have ownership of the idea. Then they have ownership of the decision. I plant the seed. You need to have the conversation with the other people who are going to be the ones who have responsibility for the decision.

From the previous director I learnt that there was another way of working in leadership which was distributed leadership. This was group decision making which I had not experienced in schools. Everyone had a voice even the cleaners. Like a school with parents and students, the museum had visitors.

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One principal used the phrase “a moment in a context” to describe how she was not always successful in bringing about a change she believed in and would try other strategies and learn from her lack of initial success. While others commented on how sometimes by observation it was seen that the wrong person was in the role and you could bring about immediate change by changing well-meaning competent people into different roles.

CHALLENGES TO EXERCISING INFLUENCE

Several of the principals we interviewed offered very specific examples of the contextual dynamics which surrounded their leadership practices. Their examples were mostly concerned with gender dynamics and illustrate how these are embedded and reinforced in the practices of both women and men, and also how they are sometimes challenged. This chapter concludes with a sample of the stories told and in this way introduces themes that are taken up in later chapters.

One principal related that when she was a younger teacher, her Principal said she was “kind” and that:

... he could not see a place for me in middle management in the school which was the pathway to principal. He could not see me taking the tough decisions. He felt I would not be able to performance manage people. He could not work me out, yet he saw me as having principal potential. However, I know now that there is another way to do it. You do not need to make people scared of you.

Gender was used to discourage another woman from applying for a leadership position in which she was interested. It was as the Director of Leadership in one of Australia’s famous boys’ schools which is over a century old. Her Principal said “You are a woman; you will never get over the bluestone wall”. However, she applied for the job and got it:

I was kind of really interested in leadership ... Mostly because I had seen it done so badly. And I think bad leadership teaches you as much as good leadership does. I really do.

I had a really interesting time and set up some really interesting programs and I don’t think the school was quite ready for it actually because I don’t think the staff, you know “this is not the way”. I mean it was an interesting and innovative idea being put into an institution that was still solid and whatever and then ... had a history.

Another principal thought rather differently:

I do not believe there have been barriers for me because I am female. However, that may be why I did not get x or y. But then I would never apply for a headship of a boys’ school. I would not

get it. It's a job but you would get resistance with an all-male environment.

As the new head of her school, another described how:

I planned the same structure I had participated in, in my previous school. It was a flat management structure and worked very well. We were equal. We collaborated and then advised the head. But in my new school it was difficult to implement as perhaps it was a male thing but initially I was unable to implement a distributed leadership model as staff wanted to know who had the most perceived power. Parents and other staff needed to know who had the most influence and so as no-one stood out they all came to me as the Principal.

I wanted to share the Acting Principal role and rotate the role, when I was away, amongst the senior management but they would want to know who had the most days. The flat structure did not work here. I needed to have an understanding of the culture. One in particular wanted his title clear as this would help him to gain a principal position whereas to me its how you do the job ... Some of the leaders have left and now I am building a team.

Another who was the first woman appointed as principal of her co-educational school said:

I was surprised when I found out that the younger women on the staff considered it was so important that a woman got the principal position. They saw me as a role model, not only for the staff but for the girls. It was important for the young women.

Finally, the imbalance of men and women at senior leadership levels across the entire system of school education was pointed out:

Certainly when the broader group of principals in independent schools get together ... you will see that there is a network of men and there is a network of women. And it is very clear.

And if we look at the leadership of Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the leadership of Australian Institute of Training and School Leadership (AITSL) ... the majority of the leadership there are men. And if you look at the state apparatus for education ... it is predominantly men. And if you look at the independent school's network, which is not only the schools but ... the principals are the members of, it is men who dominate.

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CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter has been to represent the voices of the fourteen school principals as clearly as possible, as they shared their views and experiences of the nature of their roles and contribution, the things that have been important in their desire and willingness to be leaders, the ways they go about it and the dynamics which surround and shape their practice. Like the previous chapter, it has tried to keep interpretation to a minimum, so that readers can make their own sense of their words, and to provide a transparent foundation for the interpretations offered in other chapters of this book.

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