

**Missing the bus:
Female deputy principals reflect upon their changed career paths**

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All data shown in italics in this paper denote direct quotations from the original taped responses or questionnaires. The longer passages include full referencing details, while the shorter excerpts are attributed to the named respondent/s.

Background to the Study

As an educationist, I had been concerned for some time at the rate and amount of curriculum and administrative change imposed on schools following the implementation of the 1989 *Tomorrows Schools* reforms. I was also concerned at the impact these changes were having upon the lives and career paths of principals and teachers as they tried to adapt to new structures and procedures as well as their recently acquired autonomy.

Newspaper articles and surveys during 1995-6 reported an increased pressure on principals' roles. Some well-regarded principals were leaving education in 'mid-career' for less stressful jobs, while other 'wise old heads' were taking early retirement. New Zealand could not afford, I believed, to lose highly skilled, experienced principals. I wanted to find out the reasons behind these career changes and if the careers of deputy principals had been similarly affected.

Introduction

This article has been developed from my M. Ed Admin. thesis: Getting a life: Principals and deputy principals reflect upon changed career paths. It examines the reasons why successful mid-life deputy and associate principals in Auckland primary schools were no longer seeking their own principalship positions.

The first part of the article outlines the methodology used, provides information about the respondents' backgrounds and considers factors that had influenced their careers prior to 1989. The remainder of the paper examines the reasons why the deputies who

had aspired to be principals had changed their career paths since that time. Narrative quotes illustrate the respondents' personal perceptions.

Part 1: The Study

The data were obtained from questionnaires and from group interviews held with fifteen deputy and associate principals who formed the deputy principal* cohort.

The following criteria were used to select highly 'successful' deputy principals. They were expected to:

- be currently employed as an associate or deputy principal in an Auckland urban primary school,
- be locally recognised as 'successful' in their current positions and have the potential to be promoted into principalship positions,
- be aged in their forties,
- currently have no firm commitment to applying for principalship positions.

Those selected as 'successful' were recognised by their colleagues and principals as having the skills, knowledge and abilities necessary for undertaking a principal's role.

Selecting the deputy principals

Deputy principals names were gathered using a 'snowballing' technique (Delamont, 1992). I invited principals whose senior staff met the criteria to contact me. Colleagues and those nominated were also asked to submit names. When more than twenty names were collected, the suitability of fifteen from the largest schools were confidentially verified with their principals to ensure they met the criteria.

A particular problem faced by the research related to gender. Unfortunately, no males who met the criteria were interested in participating.

* Throughout this paper, all the respondents are referred to as deputy principals

I extended the age range criterion to include three deputies over 50 as women over fifty years of age make "significant career accomplishments," Gallos (1989, p. 122). In New Zealand female teachers are promoted on average at an older age than males (Wylie, 1997). I also knew of several highly-regarded Auckland female principals, who had obtained their first principalship positions in their fifties.

Collecting the data

Data were collected through individual questionnaires and 'focus' group interviews. Once the questionnaires had been returned, the group interviews using a 'nominal group technique' (Mercer, 1993), were held with four focus groups (Anderson, 1990; Merton & Kendall, 1946), of between two and six members. Informal pre-interview chats set the scene to avoid the 'talk and run' interviewing model (Oakley, 1981).

The interviews yielded a wide range of responses (Cohen & Manion, 1994), but the time available prevented individual points of view being explored in depth. Respondents contributed in an un-predetermined, 'natural' way, with the interviewer controlling the discussions to prevent conversation overlap.

After each interview, participants had an opportunity to 'unwind', to select the pseudonyms to be used and to discuss professional issues informally. Many expressed their enjoyment of the process and reflected that it had unconsciously helped them to clarify their own professional directions and goals (Huberman, 1993). According to Matthews (1993, p. 49), "reflection is linked to a feminist methodology which attempts to empower women through a medium in which the voices of women can be heard."

Research Methodology

The main approach used was the qualitative research methodology. This allowed the respondents' views, attitudes, values and beliefs to be explored. Qualitative data analysis involves the reworking of data and developing codes and categories. It gave me opportunities to be creative and innovative and enabled me to move backwards and forwards, sifting and sorting data during the analysis phase.

The female deputy principal cohort was comprised of ten deputy principals and five associate principals, aged between 39 - 56 years and employed in Auckland. Fourteen were European and one was of part Maori/European descent.

None had gained a tertiary or professional qualification of any kind before entering teacher education. Since graduating however, all of them had been awarded their Trained Teachers Certificates and fourteen had obtained further qualifications. Most of their professional development had been focused on gaining curriculum-related, classroom relevant knowledge. However, few had obtained qualifications that had a high currency in a career outside of education.

Teaching had been the first choice of career for 12 of them, five of whom had been influenced by family teaching traditions. *It was one of the few acceptable options open to females at that time that allowed you to be your own boss* (Penny).

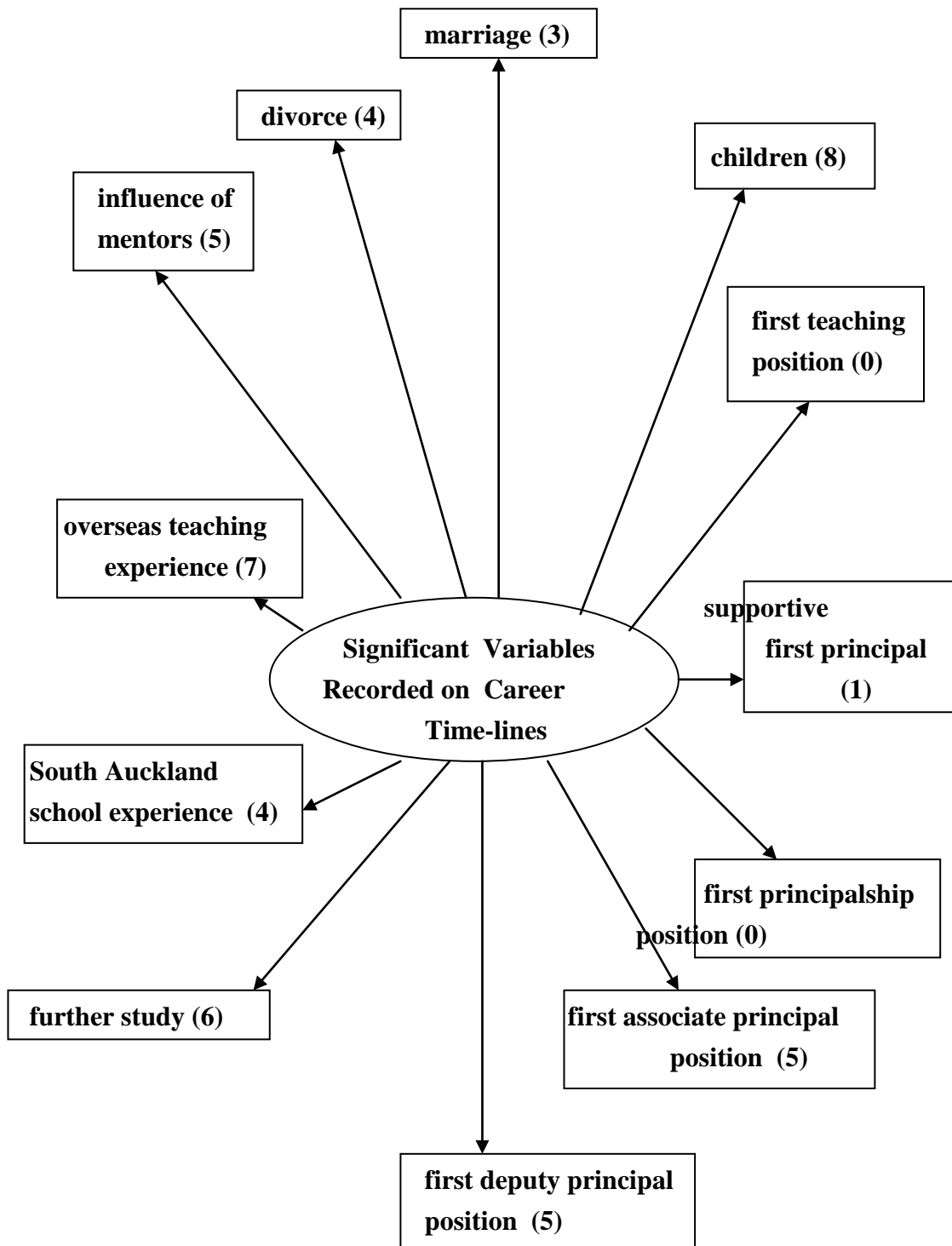
All respondents had been employed as full-time teachers in New Zealand for periods ranging from 14 - 33 years, but only Fleur had taught continuously since graduating. Ten of them had spent significant periods away from teaching, mainly for *family reasons* or *motherhood*.

Major Influences on Careers

A wide variety of different personal and professional experiences had influenced their careers. The figures in parentheses after each variable in Diagram 1, (p. 56) record the number of respondents who reported on a 'timeline of important life events' that this had influenced their careers.

Diagram 1. *The Deputy Principals*

Significant Professional and Personal Life Events
 (following initial teacher education).



Marriage and family circumstances

Marriage had strongly influenced career opportunities and developments. Over half of the cohort recorded breaks in teaching for family reasons. These had an immense impact on their careers, as invariably after each 'break' in service, they returned to basic scale teaching positions.

Rachel, Janice and Nancy, cited incidents that demonstrated the way marriage to a teacher had influenced their careers. Rachel saw it as an advantage - *both my husband and I are in education so [we] can share stress/ideas -and understand the stress of the job.* However, Janice *moved regularly while he[my husband] pursued his career. I applied for jobs closer to home when I had settled the family.*

Having children had a major impact on the teaching careers and lives of eight women. Alison's role *of wife and mother impacted on my teaching career.*

Teaching experiences that influenced careers

Various teaching experiences had influenced the careers of the deputies. Juliet was the only one whose principal in her first teaching position *fostered creativity and gave you lots of affirmations about what you were doing.*

Appointment to the first associate principal and deputy principal positions were very important. This provided Jan *a stepping stone to other things.* The opportunity for *full-time release as a walking 'sane' D.P.* had made an enormous difference to Barbara's life, *after four years of being a full-time, teaching D.P. with limited release time.*

Teaching experiences in multicultural South Auckland schools and overseas in different countries were also considered valuable. Teaching in Otara gave Penny the opportunity to work alongside a *radically different clientele to what my closeted life had been exposed to. I loved it and the people...* Alison had enjoyed being *part of another education system at two different levels for seven years.* Travel had helped Jan to *grow up* and gave Jenny an *opportunity to teach in East End schools in London and in Australia.*

The importance of university qualifications and other forms of professional study was well recognised. Lea later realised her conscious decision to *not up-grade her qualifications as my children came first, not me or my career* had restricted her career opportunities. The completion of her degree had *broadened Alison's knowledge base [and] exposed [her] to new ideas*.

Mentoring by principals, senior staff, advisers and school inspectors had assisted others with their careers. Fleur credited *many people from different educational situations* with her career development.

Career Goals Prior to 1989

In spite of being recognised as having principalship potential by their principals, five of the deputies selected in the cohort, did not want to be principals. Jenny *didn't really have a teaching goal*, while Nancy admitted she had *never aspired to be a principal*. Margaret had *always wanted to be a teacher... I enjoyed my position as an Assistant Principal* and Hannah was fully satisfied as the *head of a large junior department*. Bev's *long term goal was and still is, to be in the position I already hold*.

However, ten of the fifteen deputies had, prior to 1989, aspired to be principals. The responses from these women form the focus for the remainder of this article.

Part 2: The Perceptions of the 'Aspiring' Principals

There is no doubt that the job of a principal changed markedly between 1989 and 1996, when the data for this study was collected. Those deputies who had hoped to become principals explained how their aspirations had been affected by changes that had been implemented as a result of the new educational reforms.

- Penny *always envisaged being a principal of a smallish school in South Auckland*. However, she changed her mind because *the role of the principal is too demanding, stressful... [It is] financially not worthwhile ...there are not enough resources or time to do things properly...*

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- Rachel was *married to a principal and having experienced principalship at [named] School, I have absolutely no wish for the workload and stress involved. School tends to take over one's whole life and become a way of life,*
 - Janice had hoped *to become a principal of a Special School,*
 - Lea reported *there was a time when I was enthusiastic about becoming a principal but having relieved in the position on a number of occasions for long periods it began to dawn on me that it wasn't really worth it. We are talking about multi-million dollar businesses and principals are paid peanuts!*
 - Alison's long term goal *was to become an intermediate principal.* However, her husband's desire *to return overseas for a number of years, [coupled with] the constant and changing demands made on principals* had forced her to reassess her earlier decision.
 - Juliet had looked forward to *being a principal in the near future - starting in a small school and moving up...* but had *changed her mind* following a major confrontation between the principal and Board in her school.

Some had also been influenced by negative experiences reported by principals and friends.

Two key influences on the deputies' career decisions were a principal's increased statutory managerial responsibilities and accountabilities and the greater demands and expectations of Boards of Trustees and parents.

Developing successful management skills and establishing effective administrative systems was vitally important in the new educational climate (Ramsay, 1992; Wylie, 1997). Principals were expected to take a far greater managerial role than they had in the past, (op.cit) and this was confirmed by several of the respondents.

Juliet, Jan and Lea believed that principals had become more like *managers*, rather than *educational leaders* with *vision*, which they preferred. Juliet wanted principals to be at the *forefront of all school innovations and educational change...* Other difficulties identified included: the time available for educational leadership tasks,

maintaining curriculum knowledge, the need for a balance between the educational and management roles and the importance of delegation. The increased complexity of the job was of particular importance. Fleur believed *Principals haven't got the time to be educational leaders in the same way as in the past...*

Many of the ex-principals in my earlier study recorded spending *60-70 hours per week on administrative tasks*. Principals lacked control over their own lives (Sullivan, 1994; Wylie, 1997). Although principals still preferred the 'leading professional' role they were now expected to have more skills than those required of business managers (Mercer, 1993; Sullivan, 1994; Wylie, 1997). The deputies supported this evidence. *They need to keep up-to-date with curriculum knowledge and were actually becoming more [like] managers (Juliet)*. Penny saw them *being swamped with managerial systems and not having the time to pursue educational leadership...*

Many deputies asserted that principals were now required to undertake a wide range of tasks that had not been part of their traditional roles.

- [They were] *spending more time on property and management of people takes a greater percentage of the principal's time...[there seemed to be] less time for getting on with the job of educating children and [for] staff development.* (Sue)
- *There are a lot of new classrooms, property maintenance, Boards of Trustees finance... all those things, correspondence, [the] actual running of the school in the leadership educationally, which should be the task of the principal is no longer...(Lea)*

Fleur felt the *most negative thing is not having your own life. This is what really turned me off...*

Problems associated with Boards of Trustees

The deputies believed that a number of problems associated with Boards of Trustees contributing to principals' dissatisfaction with their role. The relationship between the principal and the Board was seen as critical. The increased powers awarded to the Boards of Trustees and parents to 'self-manage' schools were further concerns. Sue believed that *since Tomorrows Schools, pressures/demands have really tripled...* [and

attended] *Board meetings to support the principal.* Juliet, a staff Board of Trustee representative, described

The treatment of the Board of a very good principal and the expectations that the community had of what a principal should be - an up-standing, corporate citizen - I felt boxed in - and decided against being a principal. There were huge differences in the way that the principal operated and the Board... and that was about who was controlling the school... the level of interference... teachers seem to be spending most of their time trying to educate the community, rather than educating the kids... Other people seem to be in charge of the school...

Lack of Board knowledge, support and time available placed additional stress and responsibility on principals.

- *Barbara would have preferred less pressure from BOT which is liable to change every 3 years!*
- *If you have a Board that is not supportive... it can all go down hill pretty quickly ... communities can turn against teachers very easily... The way the Board treated a very good principal, almost put me off education altogether... (Juliet)*
- *It still falls on the principal, even in high decile schools... the lawyers, the accountants and the architects, it's a voluntary thing and they are too busy. The time they spend at school is time away from their own business and it's a real imposition. I think that's one of the reasons why principals have had to assume finance roles... rebuilding... In theory that should be delegated... (Alison)*

The time involved in consensus decision-making created additional problems.

- *Sitting on policy meetings with parents who come from a very different perspective at times, it takes such a long time to get through work... (Juliet)*

Unpleasant leadership experiences since 1989 had already had a negative impact on some deputies' lives. As an acting principal Leah had had *a major problem with the Board of Trustees being captured by a special interest group... I went to the Ministry*

and... said "Help! Our school is in serious difficulty. Someone... a Board member... was misappropriating funds." They said, "Sort it out yourself!"

The influence of *Tomorrows Schools* on the principal's role

The *Tomorrows Schools* reforms had significantly influenced the principal's role. Jan stated

The job of the principal has changed from being a leadership role to that of a personal manager to a BOT. Their job specification makes it difficult for them to have the personal contact with staff and pupils, which I believe is important... As a principal you can develop something that's actually going to make learning and teaching more fun for kids, but I see that doesn't always happen. I think it's the DPs or APs who are doing that sort of role now. The principal is supporting it from afar, but not in, not as close as he was...

Wylie (1997), reported that principals no longer had time to work beside teachers.

Although the deputy principals acknowledged the major changes and increased complexity of the principal's role since 1989, they continued to expect them to be the educational school leader with an up-to-date knowledge of current learning methods. As Fleur said *principals have got to keep their finger on what's going on...*The deputies continued to expect principals to be able to effectively execute a dual leadership/management role, in spite of recognising their 'role overload' situation!

Reasons for Changed Career Aspirations

The deputies' earlier career aspirations had changed as the result of factors both within education and outside of it.

Factors within schools that influenced career decisions

In schools, the stress and loneliness of the principal's position, time constraints, demands of the job and difficulties associated with teacher incompetence were particularly important factors. Principals too, sometimes adversely influenced their deputies' career progress.

The stress and loneliness of the job

Barbara, Lea, Jan and Sue emphasised the *stress and loneliness* associated with the position of principal (Sutton, 1999; Wylie, 1997). They based these opinions on their personal experiences as acting principals.

- *Stress actually plays a big role. I think a lot of them [principals] aren't having a life of their own any more. It's controlled by other people and I actually believe we need to be in control of our own life and our own job... (Jan)*
- *Whereas Lea said I hate the buck stopping with me. Being a principal is a very lonely job... I've been probably acting principal almost two years... I hated every minute of it. I just found it so stressful. I don't want it...*
- *When you are a principal, you are at the top of the tree and my God, does that tree move in the wind! Whereas the people that are low down on the trunk can huddle together, you know... it's the isolation part... no matter how open that principal's door might be... it is solitary, it is lonely... (Barbara).*

Time constraints, commitment required and the demands of the job

The *long hours required to do the job competently* concerned Alison and Barbara as did the *huge demands* members of the community made on the position and the toll it took on their lives. Some of them were not prepared to take on a position which would mean, as Fleur recorded, *not having a life of your own*. Sue argued *the paper war and not being left to get on and get the job done was extremely frustrating for principals... Barbara had watched what happened to my own principal... he literally spent the early hours of the morning seven days a week... it nullified his family life. I wasn't prepared to compromise that ... Juliet took a long term view... you think, if you get a job at 30, 40, do you want to spend 20 - 25 years being principal? I think that's horrendous!*

Difficulties associated with incompetent teachers

Difficulties principals experienced in dealing with teacher incompetence also influenced deputies' career decisions. Jan had seen *some principals go through hell and I don't want to do that...* Juliet had experienced difficulties associated with teacher incompetency, too, *...if you've got to go through a case like that it has a tremendous effect on a school... it's just horrendous what I've seen principals go through when they've actually taken up an incompetency case... shocking, shocking teacher... That teacher really got the community against the principal and the principal went instead...*

The influence of principals on career progress

Principals exert control over the career progressions of their staff and this can seriously impact on teachers' lives (Horder, 1995; Jones & Hayes, 1991). Staff relied on principals as a major source of professional advice and support for job references (Wylie, 1994). Juliet reported that her career plans to *win new positions* had been adversely affected by an unco-operative principal. The lack of neutral 'outside' educational agencies or advisers to whom they could go for career guidance, support, or to obtain a reference about the quality of their work was of particular concern to the deputies.

The women in the study demonstrated a deep commitment to the teaching and learning process and reported they had had a great deal of job satisfaction. I found no evidence to support claims (Maclean, 1992) that women lacked the career commitment of men. None of my respondents had sought positions outside of teaching nor had tried to obtain qualifications that could have enhanced other career opportunities.

Factors beyond the school that influenced career decisions

Factors beyond the school also influenced the career decisions and directions of the deputies involved in this study. Many of them stressed the importance of their families and personal relationships (Gallos, 1989; Hill, 1994; Neville, 1988). Those who had taken 'time out' for family reasons had spent considerably longer as assistant teachers than their peers. Breaks for motherhood inevitably resulted in a return to relieving, part-time or full-time basic scale teaching positions. Janice's career path illustrated the way marriage had constrained her career when she took *time out to settle her children*

each time her husband moved in pursuit of his career. This pattern is not restricted to New Zealand women (Hill, 1994).

In addition, personal factors, such as age, quality of life, the needs of family and being a woman were additional highly relevant reasons why some of those in this study changed their minds about becoming a principal.

Age, quality of life and family needs

Some deputies firmly believed their age would be against them if they applied for principalship positions. Lea believed she was *at the wrong end of my career now...* Fleur thought *I think it's the age expectation now, too. My friends who were principals started... at the age of 55 - 60... there was the expectation that those experienced and knowledgeable women would make wonderful principals, but now you need to be 30 - 40 to be even thought of...*

When Jan was the staff representative on a Board of Trustees she became concerned about the quality of her life.

Up to about the end of last year I had no time to myself. I was involved with the Board and all the sorts of things that went with it... I decided I needed to take more control and so I opted out of Boards... I would go to PTA teams when I needed to... yes. I'm trying to get my quality of life back and I'm trying to do things for me... otherwise your health goes down ...

The needs of their families came first for several deputy principals who had experienced difficulties trying to balance their home and work lives. Some mentioned additional responsibilities for those who required special support, such as elderly or disabled relations and young children. Sue said *I had my children late so... I can't really be bothered going through that [being a principal] with two young children...* The career paths of both Janice and Rachel reflected the difficulties and obligations placed on them by their family responsibilities that they considered more important than the progress of their personal careers.

The study confirmed that supportive husbands were a crucial factor in the development of the careers of successful women administrators (Woo, 1985; Neville,

1988). *Having supportive partners or husbands* was vitally important to Penny and Alison. Janice said *I was not ambitious until after I separated from my husband and had the opportunity to pursue my own career.*

Being a woman

During the interviews, several deputies agreed that support in the home was crucial. Alison said *If you're a woman principal, you need a wife! Women... they forget they are probably twice as intelligent as this guy who is doing it already... those of us who are older, even if we may have been encouraged by parents... there was still this overall feeling that men were expected to do that, but you weren't...*

Several deputies speculated upon the ways in which gender may have influenced their career decisions. Jan believed *women principals have to work twice as hard... as... male counterparts do, to be accepted* [by the community and sometimes other women]... Lea said *Women principals have it really hard... we have to work twice as hard to get there and [we're] too damn old by the time [we] get there! Women are not getting appointed... If you want a job in a rural school, you have to be an ex-All Black, 25, with a master's degree in education administration... They play musical chairs out there...*

These comments about the influence of gender on women's career plans are supported by others (Hart, 1989; Hill, 1994; Maclean, 1992; Woo, 1985). Several male ex-principals involved in the original study (Palmer, 1997) agreed that women experienced additional difficulties when seeking principals' positions. Dale's female deputy principal, who was, in his opinion, *the best applicant*, was not appointed to a position, as the Board sought a male. Fred also knew of women whom he believed were *not being fairly treated* in their attempts to win principals' jobs.

Conclusion

Of the fifteen 'successful' female deputy principals who participated in this study, ten had, prior to the *Tomorrows Schools* educational changes of 1989, looked forward to being appointed as primary school principals. However, by 1996, they had reconsidered this career direction for a number of reasons.

Many of the changes associated with the new educational climate had made the position an undesirable career option. The increased managerial focus, the stress and loneliness of the job, the workload and time commitment required, the difficulties associated with Boards of Trustees and problems related to teacher incompetence were some of the reasons why the deputies had changed their minds. Some of them felt further disadvantaged by their gender and age when Boards of Trustees became responsible for principal appointments. Lea reported - *I am too old... I have missed the bus... Boards of Trustees... don't want me...*

However, it was not only the changes within education that had influenced career decisions. Personal relationships, quality of lifestyle and family responsibilities were also very important. The increasingly challenging job of a primary principal was no longer an attractive position for these successful, committed professionals.

This study supports evidence by Wylie (1997), that many skilled female leaders were not interested in becoming principals. A number of dissatisfactions have been identified with the principal's role. It is important that ways are found to address these and appropriate incentives provided to attract more women into the position. Ideas worthy of consideration are:

- The early identification and mentoring of those with leadership potential and the provision of varied educational and administrative experiences.
- Additional administrative support (particularly in low decile schools) to lighten principal's workloads.
- The establishment of an independent body which could provide professional advice and counsel for principals.

Unless the current situation is resolved, New Zealand will continue to under-utilise the talents of some of its potentially best educational leaders.

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