Scaling the Mountain to Principalship in New Zealand

The Enablers and Barriers in a Female Principal's Journey

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Girls are now outperforming boys in high schools and universities around the world and are currently entering the workforce at higher salaries than ever before (Slaughter, 2015). However, there have been minimal changes in the proportion of females in top executive positions in the last decade (Fitzgerald & Wilkinson, 2010; Hansen, 2014; Kelsey, Allen, Coke & Ballard, 2014) despite alterations to the law to create a more equitable practice (Shah, 2015). Consequently, leadership and the influence for change remains highly gendered (Lyman, Strachan & Lazaridou, 2012). This gendered practice translates into education, and although the majority of teachers are women in most Westernized countries, including New Zealand, the majority of principals are men (Fuller, 2013; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Ho, 2015).

For example, in New Zealand in 2017, 59 percent of secondary school (students ages 13–18) teachers are women but 30 percent of principal positions are held by women (Ministry of Education, 2017). This being the case, it is useful to reflect on the stories of women who have achieved school principal positions, in order to discover what helped and hindered them on their journey.

This chapter describes the journey to school principalship of a New Zealand woman committed to making a difference for the students with whom she worked. Janet described her journey into and through leadership. She identified the enablers and barriers she experienced along the way and the identity work that enabled her to gain her first position as a school principal. Janet acknowledged the impact of gender, being a wife, and being a mother to a school-aged child, and the gender-specific expectations others have of principals, as barriers in her journey.

She also identified enablers—the people and the processes that helped her to succeed in her career, including her strong belief in social justice; her support systems, including the mentors who guided her throughout her career path to the present day; and professional development opportunities. She talked about a gestalt shift in her identity and its collision with circumstances which gave her the confidence to apply for her current job as a school principal. Janet showed she was capable of making workable, manageable, and balanced judgments in relation to her work and life, including finding people and activities that could support her. Building on the work of Mahmood (2015), we present a visual metaphor that encapsulates Janet's journey.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research was designed to elicit the lived experiences of a woman leader, who had been recently appointed to her role. Purposive sampling was engaged to find a first-time female principal who was willing to share her experiences about entry into formal leadership of a school. Janet, a New Zealand European first-time principal, was appointed to her leadership role in her 50s, and when approached was willing to share her story through a dialogical, ethnographic interview (Le Fevre & Farquhar, 2015; Lyman et al., 2012). The interview took place at her school, and through the use of a guided interview schedule Janet was supported to share her story into and through the early stages of her leadership.

FINDINGS

The findings shared in this section will outline Janet's personal background and upbringing as a significant influence along with the barriers and enablers she identified as critical to her success as a first-time principal.

JANET'S PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Janet was a fifth-generation teacher in New Zealand. Her mother was a kindergarten teacher and her mother's

father was a principal. After the school day finished, Janet and her brothers spent a lot of time at their mother's kindergarten as it was only three doors down from where they lived, so teaching was the norm. Janet also used to mark both of her brothers' homework after school and "although she wasn't a good speller" she liked to "use the red pen." Janet's mother often said to her when she was young that "teaching was in her blood."

In the early 1980s Janet attended Teachers' College. According to Janet, "[at that time] experience was more important than your qualifications," she was qualified to teach with a diploma not a degree. She taught at an intermediate school (10–12 year olds) in an isolated rural area in the central North Island with a high percentage of Māori in the community. Later, she met and married her husband, had a child, and stayed in that community. Janet soon moved to teach in the local secondary school. At that time secondary school teachers were paid more than their primary school colleagues, who were seen as having lesser value. As Janet articulated, her colleagues did not know about her background and qualifications, and made assumptions about her. Over the years, Janet applied for and was appointed to more senior positions. She gained a deputy principal position at a larger school in a different town and after 13 years returned to her first high school as principal.

PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO PRINCIPALSHIP

When reflecting on her career progression, Janet identified a number of barriers that she believed slowed her journey to principalship.

Gender: Women Teach and Men Lead

Janet identified the stereotypes of men and women in education as a major barrier to her leadership progression. The stereotypical characteristics of teachers, such as caring, patience, creativity, and so on, are often seen as female traits, but Janet found, in her experience, the features of leadership were typically linked to masculine traits (Litmanovitz, 2011). Women do not reflect the stereotypical image of a high school principal (Coleman, 2005; Coleman, 2007). They struggle to be shortlisted for principal positions because some people doubt women's commitment to their work, due to the demands upon them as wives and mothers, and doubt their ability to lead others, particularly men (Coleman, 2007; Hewlett & Luce, 2005). Asking for help, being seen as too kind, too gentle, overly emotional and sensitive, and a person who cannot make difficult decisions may also add to the

stereotype that women are incapable of being leaders (Bassett, 2009; Fuller, 2013).

It has been suggested that women and men may differ in their leadership style and skills (Eckman, 2004) as "feminist educational leadership is educational rather than managerial" (Strachan, 2009, p. 123). However, Fuller (2013) questions this as she argued that women can use power to control and men can use it to empower. Janet does not conform to the expected male norms for principalship but deliberately uses a collaborative approach and gives "responsibility and authority" to her senior leadership team (Lyman et al., 2012).

Alongside her collaborative approach Janet is not afraid to show her vulnerabilities and says, "It is a female principal thing. I haven't come across any male principal doing this. Like if I talk to a male principal and I don't know something then I want an answer. Very rarely will they admit they don't know whereas I am the first one to say, well I don't know but I will go and find out for you."

Similar to other female educational leaders who have gone before her, Janet moves dynamically and fluidly across binary gender norms, even if these are linked to stereotypes (Christman & McClellan, 2008; Coleman, 2009). She said, "I can play the dumb female, help me, help me I don't know what I am doing." But she also takes on the role of "I am actually a woman and I have got to this position and I don't need any of you men to help me. I can stand up in my own right." Janet tries to find "a balance of those two" because "you need their [the male principals] support a lot of the time." Through thoughtful projections of herself, she negotiates the relationships involved in principalship in order to get what she needs.

Whānau/Family and Motherhood

Janet found that whānau/family acted as a barrier to her career development, especially at a specific time in her career. Women principals undertake multiple roles, maintaining their professional role as well as acting as homemakers/mothers/caretakers of young children, teenagers, and older parents (Hansen, 2014). Women often put their needs of their partner and family ahead of their own career aspirations (Coleman, 2009; Neidhart, 2009). An example of this is the prioritization to relocate to take up new employment. Research shows that few women have the luxury of relocating (Neidhardt, 2009; Robinson, 2015). However, in Janet's case, she and her husband had "looked at moving but house prices were absolutely phenomenal [and she was] quite happy to travel" for around 45 minutes each way when she was appointed to a new school as a deputy principal.

Janet also understood that principalship "does put pressure on relationships, marriages." This made her less willing to make the sacrifice of home/career balance, including time spent away from her husband and daughter. Janet wanted to wait until she had more time and fewer responsibilities before moving into principalship. Her goal of being a good wife and mother was stronger than her goal of becoming a principal, and Janet waited until her daughter had left school before she pursued the role of principal. Janet felt it more important to put time into her role as mother while her daughter was still living at home. This resonates with the opinions of a number of female leaders in the United States (Kelsey et al., 2014). However, more recent research has detected that a new generation of women appear ready to access leadership positions at a younger age as they accept compromises in their home and work life (Sperandio, 2015).

PERCEIVED ENABLERS TO PRINCIPALSHIP

Janet was able to identify a number of enablers that helped her eventually become a school principal. These included her very strong beliefs in social justice for the students she was working with, and the support she received.

Passion for Social Justice

Janet's mother was a deacon in the Anglican Church and also a Justice of the Peace, so Janet "saw her dealing with many social issues." Janet applied these family values as her moral "guiding compass" (Lyman et al., 2012, p. 83). She affirmed that these values guided her throughout her teaching career, directing her decisions as she moved into a principalship position. Social justice remained an ongoing motivator as she continued in her role as principal.

Janet has a true passion for her school community. She talked about the students she worked with as her "extended kids." She truly believes that society "can't have any more kids falling through the cracks and doing nothing." This personal commitment to working for equity and positive outcomes for disadvantaged students has been reported by many other principals and leaders both male and female (Brown, 2002; Harris, James, Gunraj, Clarke, & Harris, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). Subsequently, social justice compelled Janet to make the journey from deputy principal to principal.

Personal and Professional Support

Janet attributed her successful journey to principalship to the support of a range of people. She acknowledged that her husband was "a great support" throughout her career.

She talked about the way he shared childcare duties as well as helping around her school. Family connections and support are of the utmost importance to both Janet and her husband. When setting up as a new principal, Janet had "aunties and uncles, nieces and nephews coming in hanging up curtains and putting them into classrooms." International research identifies the importance of a husband's backing when a woman becomes a principal or takes on a similar leadership role (Kelsey et al., 2014; Masters, 2015; Rosario, 2015; Young & McLeod, 2001).

Support for Janet also came from female colleagues with small children who also used the school's daycare center. Janet reminisced, "it was nice that a lot of teachers had their children there, had that empathy and quite often one of us would go and pick up four kids, while their mothers were still working."

Mentors and Role Models

Janet was given "professional endorsement" (Young & McLeod, 2001, p. 485) by two male mentors who encouraged her and gave her confidence to apply for promotions. Research has found that gender is not necessarily a factor in mentoring, in terms of positive and understanding relationships (Kinnersley, 2009; Lyman et al., 2012). Janet's first mentor was a senior teacher who identified her potential early in her career. Her other mentor was the principal at her first high school teaching post. She talked about how important it was to have someone in a position of authority who actually believes in you. "He believed in me, I didn't believe in me but he did." He gave her responsibilities in the school, which is seen as a vital element in pre-principalship training (Weindling & Dimmock, 2006). He continued his mentoring role and also supported Janet when she took on her first principal position.

Participating in Professional Leadership Learning and Development

Janet was encouraged by her mentor to study for a diploma in School Management. This meant traveling a considerable distance to Auckland every holiday. This course included learning about things such as personnel management including conflicts in staffing, dealing with open to learning conversations, and so on, and Janet speaks very highly of it. Professional development such as this course helped Janet develop a sense of self-belief. Taking on the role of acting principal provided another avenue for professional learning and is one of the most valuable ways to prepare for a principal position (Weindling & Dimmock, 2006). Janet had the opportunity to do this, and it gave her the confidence to think that she could become a principal in the future.

Being in an acting principal position increased Janet's confidence. She found that she could manage the role, and although it was stressful, it was a great learning experience.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

This investigation documents Janet's career path and therefore her life journey (Jones & Le Fevre, 2015). From very early on in their careers women need to be aware of the barriers that may stop or slow them down on their trek toward principalship. Simultaneously, women must grow the enablers that will support them in any future expeditions. Individual women do have to take responsibility and champion themselves (Kelsey et al., 2014), but society also needs a political shift to incorporate these ideas (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

One of the key elements in Janet's journey was her confidence in her own ability and to contemplate applying for principalship. Men often just take a chance on a promotion whereas women may feel like they need to tick all the boxes before they can confidently apply for a role (Future Leaders Trust as cited in Tickle, 2015, September, 29). This would indicate that society must find ways to develop confidence in female leaders by building up the enablers and minimizing or breaking the barriers to guarantee an increase in the number of female principals in schools as well as male principals who do not fit into a constricting masculine construct (Moorosi, 2015).

Someone asked Janet, "What's your next project?" and she replied, "I haven't finished this one yet." She continued by saying, "This school is definitely my swansong. I'm fifty-five now, I was fifty-two when I took on my first position as principal and now at fifty-five I sort of look at it and think this is my home. I'm going to give it the next ten years so, basically, to me, this is it." She is challenged yet content with her role as principal in her own community and will continue to work in this until the end of her career.

Figure 10.1.   Janet's Climb to Principalship—the Barriers and the Enablers as a Visual Metaphor. Drawn by Jenni Bayliss

ADVICE FROM JANET

We end this chapter with Janet's voice, as this is her story. The three pieces of advice she would give women who are considering becoming principals are:

- A lot of people wouldn't agree but it has huge implications on your time with your family so wait until they (the children) are older. At least when they are already in high school to be able to cope and do both [be a mother and be a principal].
- Find yourself a good mentor when you are a DP (deputy principal).
- Don't ever be ashamed to say you don't know. There is no such thing as a dumb question. I ask them all the time because I don't know how you can find out if you don't ask. (Janet)

Her final words ring true as she describes her views on what it means to be a women leader, stating, "I have to be honest, I would say to anybody, yourself included, if you're thinking about it, a principal's position is not a job, it's a life, you actually live it 24/7."

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