Scaling the Mountain to Principalship
Barriers and Enablers in a Female First Time Principal's Journey to Leadership

Samantha Mortimer and Frances Edwards

My background and context

My leadership journey

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Abaida Mahmood's (September, 2015) visual metaphor of the barriers in a women's life to achieving leadership positions

Why is it important to investigate this topic?

- 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)

Why is it important to investigate this topic? – continued

- The majority of teachers are women in most westernised countries, including New Zealand, the majority of principals are men (Fuller, 2013; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Ho, 2015).

- In 2017 that around 59% of secondary school (13 – 18 year olds) teachers are women but 30% of principal positions were held by women (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Methods

- I purposively sampled to find a female first time 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 fifties, and when approached was willing to share her story through a dialogical, ethnographic interview

- 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
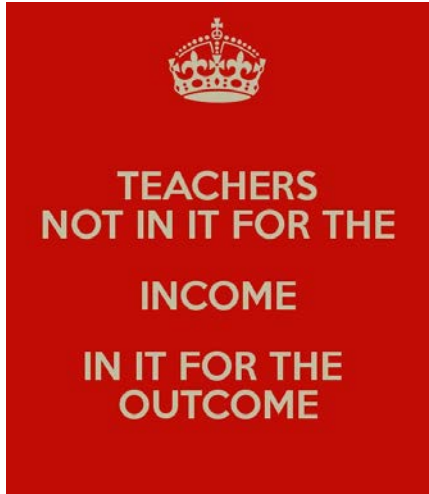
Janet's background

- Janet was a fifth generation teacher in New Zealand and "teaching was in the blood"
- she liked to "use the red pen"
- Trained as a primary school teacher
- Worked in an intermediate then a high school
- Worked her way up from Dean, AP, DP
- Moved to a bigger school as a DP

Barriers

Barriers - *Gender - Women teach and men lead*

- The stereotypical characteristics of teachers, such as caring, patience, creativity and so on, are often seen as female traits

- The features of leadership were typically linked to masculine traits (similar to the findings of Litmanovitz, 2011) and women do not (often) reflect the stereotypical image of a high school principal (Coleman, 2005, 2007).

Barriers - *Gender - Women teach and men lead continued*
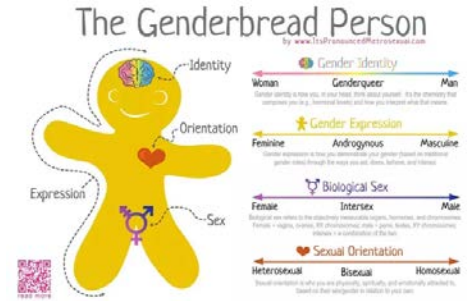
- When reflecting on gender differences as a principal Janet says that she moves dynamically and fluidly across binary gender norms, even if these are linked to stereotypes (Christman & McClellan, 2008; Coleman, 2009).

- 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".

Barriers - *Gender - Women teach and men lead continued*

- As a principal she uses collaborative approach and gives "responsibility and authority" to her senior leadership team

- She is also willing to ask questions and not be the knower of all

"It is a female principal thing. I haven't come across any male principals 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".

Barriers - Whānau and Motherhood

- Janet found that whānau/family acted as a barrier to her career development, especially at a specific time in her career.

- Janet remarked, "I could be a DP (deputy principal) standing on my head"

- However, she placed her "professional self-actualization in the back seat" (Hansen, 2014, p. 20)

Barriers - Whānau and Motherhood - continued

- On balance Janet felt it more important to put time into her role as mother while her daughter was still living at home.

- She also recognised that Principalship "does put pressure on relationships, marriages".

- "I would never recommend it [principalship] if you have little children".

Barriers - Whānau and Motherhood - continued

Relocation – Janet and her husband discussed it but

decided not to

- Research shows that few women have the luxury of relocating (Neidhardt, 2009; Robinson, 2015),

- Kerry Robinson (2015) found that in the USA "society discourages family change for the sake of a wife's career" (p. 59).

Enablers

Enablers - *Passion for Social Justice*

- Family values from her parents as her
moral "guiding compass" (Lyman. Strachan, & Lazaridou,
2012, p. 83).

- True passion for her community and that society "can't have any more kids falling through the cracks and doing nothing".

- Including her own family members as she had "a niece and a nephew in this town who walked out of school aged 15...have done nothing and receive the dole [employment benefit]".

Enablers - Personal and Professional Support

- *"It's good to have a supportive husband".*

- "Shall I come to school and sort them out?"

- 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".

Enablers - *Mentors and Role Models*

- Janet was given "professional endorsement" (Young & McLeod, 2001, p. 485) by two mentors who encouraged her and gave her confidence to apply for promotions on her rise to principalship.

- Both mentors were male, but Janet did not find this

  detrimental.

- "He believed in me, I didn't believe in me but he did. Whatever he saw in me, I don't know to this day, he got me to go to the [university] course. I wouldn't have gone myself, I wouldn't have thought that I should go to something like that…"

- Tim would say, "When I give you the responsibility that also carries the authority. So in other words don't run back to me. Because every time he asked me to do something in the early days as a DP (deputy principal), [I would ask] are you happy with this?"

Enablers - Developing a Perception of What Leadership Looks Like *(sometimes a barrier)*

- Janet spent time observing people in leadership roles, using them as role models.

- She didn't like what she saw

Enablers - *Developing a Perception of What Leadership Looks Like (sometimes a barrier)*

- Janet said, "I wanted to stay working with the kids" and the more I saw "what the secondary principal did and [how he] was in his office all the time" the more I was "put off".

- She felt that at least as a deputy principal "you are out there, you are with the kids. You are teaching, you are in the classroom and that put me off seeing as a [full principal] he really couldn't get away from his desk".

Enablers - *Participating in Professional Leadership Learning and Development*

- *Trained as a primary teacher*

She commented, "I've always believed primary teachers teach children [whereas] secondary teachers teach subjects".

- Unitec Diploma in School Management

- *Opportunity to be an Acting Principal*

"It wasn't a reality, I was only baby-sitting ... I wasn't carrying the can for anything". She was just "keeping the seat warm".

Enablers – Professional Learning Community

- Janet was further encouraged when two members of staff, who did not always get on well with each other and her, told her that "they really enjoyed working with me" as principal.

- This was the moment where she thought "well, maybe I could do this".

- It was a trigger, enabling a sudden shift in Janet's perceived identity, meaning that she was suddenly able to see herself as a principal.
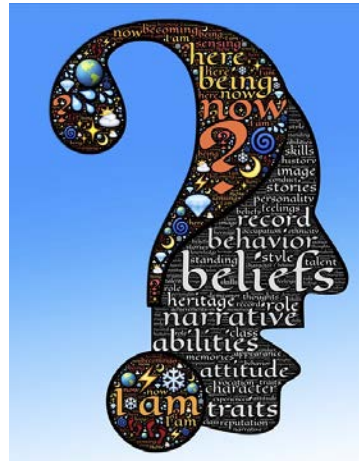
TURNING POINTS - WHEN IDENTITY AND CIRCUMSTANCES COLLIDE

- Up to this point Janet was "put off a little bit by being a principal. I don't really know what put me off or why I changed my mind of being a principal but I really wanted to keep in contact with the kids".

- Later on in her career, Janet said, "I lost my confidence that I could actually be a principal and one of the reasons for that was going to deputy principal conferences [which were] very heavily male".

- It has been found that for many women, (professional) identity is linked to confidence (Bosak & Sczesny, 2008; Duncan, 2013).

TURNING POINTS - WHEN IDENTITY AND CIRCUMSTANCES COLLIDE - continued

- Janet could not equate her identity as a woman to her identity as a principal; she did not see herself as having the necessary characteristics to be able to handle such a position at that time

TURNING POINTS - WHEN IDENTITY AND CIRCUMSTANCES COLLIDE - continued

Collision of circumstances

1. Janet had just finished being Acting Principal

2. Janet's daughter was about to leave home

3. A principal position became available in the home town where she had "taught both the parents and their children".

4. She knew that the time was right and "It was like, well, maybe I could do this".

RELISHING IN THE ROLE AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

- Janet still has days when she thinks "what the hell am I doing?" and is the first to admit that she's "made a couple of mistakes".

- However, "we can't have any more kids falling through

the cracks and doing nothing".

- Therefore, even when times are tough "because there is many a day inside these four walls I've cracked, cried under the sun, 'I can't do this'", Janet puts on her "stage face" and becomes "the best actor there is because no one can see that you are not coping because if they see you are not coping everything else falls apart".

Main Stage

RELISHING IN THE ROLE AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE - continued

However, Janet's fear has now become her reality

- You just don't have that time so I've sacrificed. I don't play sport, so I come to school and I work 6 to 6, six days a week, so I work Sundays and when I go home, if hubby is home we will share a meal together, that is about the extent of it, and if he is not home I go home, terrible diet, I just eat whatever is fastest to cook, get out the laptop and carry on working, so honestly I don't do anything other than work.

RELISHING IN THE ROLE AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE - continued

Janet was reluctant to taking on a principal role because she worried she would miss time with the students.

- She commented that, as principal, her focus is on "when's ERO coming; what's the latest complaint from the community; have we got enough money for this; a teacher's on maternity leave so I've got to get staff for that … It is really funny as not one of those things actually features the kids".

RELISHING IN THE ROLE AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE - continued

But Janet is a child centred person

- "trying to establish a culture, send them to me when they have done good stuff, I want to see them when they're awesome".

- Janet taught a class last term "and it was absolutely delightful".

# RELISHING IN THE ROLE AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE - continued

- "very whānau orientated" which is "really important to me as a woman".

- During "parent interviews, we organise for senior students to look after the [teachers'] children".

- She also has "more empathy for female staff in the sense that my deputy principal's got two little children and I worry about her, the amount of hours she spends here".

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS TO CHANGE THE STATUS QUO

- Janet recognises that principals are responsible for the education of children in a society that views educational qualifications as the measure of children's success and school effectiveness (Fuller, 2013).
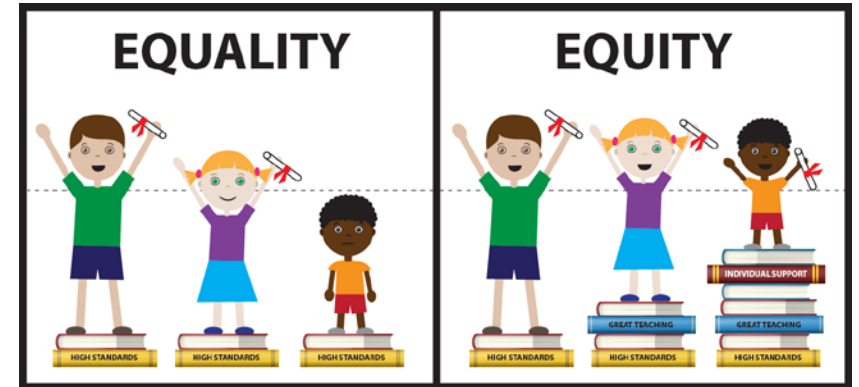
- Although Janet understands this she also desires the best for everyone, not just the "small line" of academic students. Therefore, she turned the "timetable on its head".

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS TO CHANGE THE STATUS QUO - continued

- Our philosophy is that if we can have every child in this school leaving with a driver's licence of some sort and our 18 year olds if they can have a fork-lift driver's licence, with liaison with the local company, they can get jobs. Every child will leave with a barista qualification and a first aid certificate because those three things will get them a job before NCEAs.

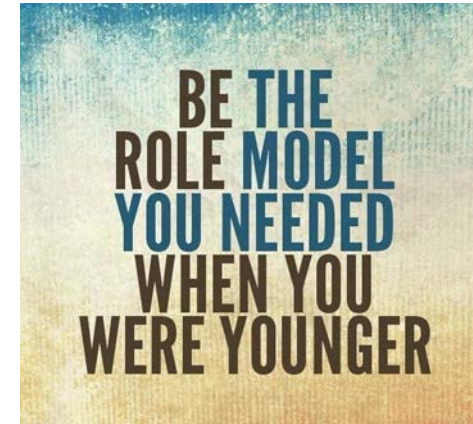# CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS – building the enablers

1. Consider different ways to develop **confidence** in female leaders 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).

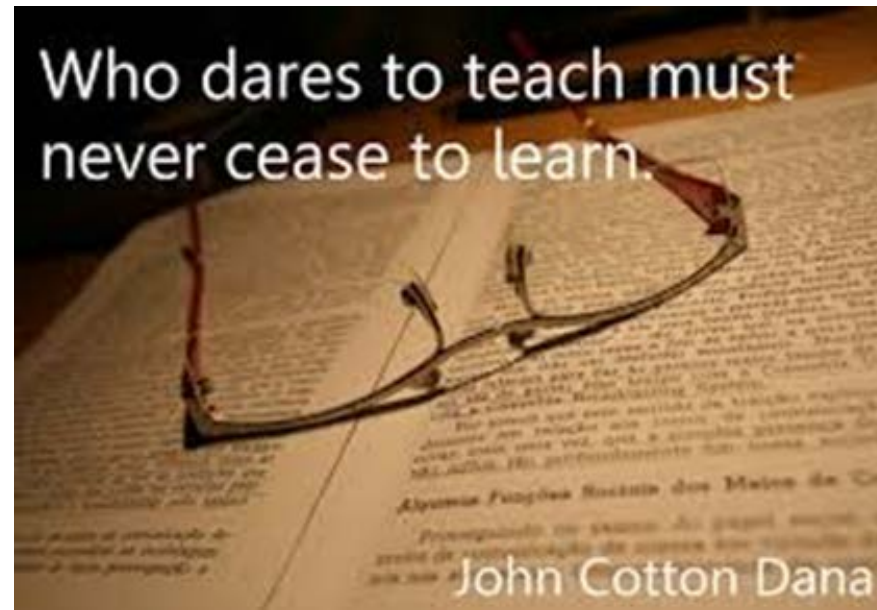# CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS – building the enablers continued

2. A range of positive role models and mentors

(Sanchez & Thornton, 2010; Webster, 2015).

3. Break down the stereotypes by providing

consciousness raising professional learning in relation to social justice

and equity issues for all staff and students.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS – building the enablers continued

4. Professional development (Shakeshaft, Robinson, Grogan, & Sherman Newcomb, 2015; Skinner, 2009).

• may boost women further up the mountain as female exceptional candidates may create a more level playing field to compete with males

Who dares to teach must never cease to learn.

John Cotton Dana

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS – pulling down the barriers
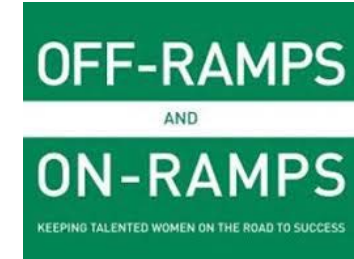
1. Schools need to understand the complex non-linear careers of women by supporting rather than punishing them (Hewlett, Luce, Schiller & Southwell, 2005). This is for ALL women not just women with little children.

Therefore they should work towards:

- keeping women "on ramp" (Hewlett et al., 2005). This is for ALL women not just women with little children.

- "waiting for" women on them to gain or retain maternity leave and nurture positions of leadership.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS – pulling down the barriers continued

2. As women may not get shortlisted – schools could ensure that:

- BOTs need to be trained in equity issues

- The criteria for a principal position does not stop women from being shortlisted or hired (Correll, 2013)

- There are quota systems for women to be shortlisted (Eliophotou-Menon, Koutselini & Charalambidou-Solomi, 2015; Gentleman, 2015; Lyman et al., 2012; Young & McLeod, 2001)

Figure 1. Samantha Mortimer's visual metaphor of Janet's barriers and enablers (drawn by Jenni Bayliss).

Final advice from Janet

- "A lot of people wouldn't agree but it [principalship] 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".

- "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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