

Pathways to secondary school principalship: Enablers and challenges

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A recent Education Review Office (ERO) report on preparation and support for new principals in Aotearoa New Zealand revealed that they are not always well prepared for aspects of their role (ERO, 2023). Three key drivers for preparation were found to be previous leadership experience, participation in post-graduate study related to school leadership, and coaching and mentoring support. While this report focused on both primary and secondary principals in their first 5 years as principals, two other recent qualitative studies have looked specifically at pathways to principalship in secondary settings. The first study involving interviews with eight recently appointed principals, highlighted the importance of career choices, postgraduate study, targeted professional learning and development (PLD), exposure to elements of a principal's role, and mentoring. The second study explored the enablers and challenges experienced by five female principals of co-educational schools. Aspects that were identified as both challenges and enablers in this study included the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of principals and others, the support and encouragement received, mentoring and PLD experiences, and work life balance. This article will draw on the findings of the two studies and the ERO report to highlight the challenges in current principal preparation in the secondary sector and make recommendations for aspiring leaders considering principalship, current principals and Boards of Trustees, and policy makers.

Introduction

The role of school principals in Aotearoa New Zealand has been described as complex but rewarding (Education Review Office (ERO), 2023). Wylie (2023) suggests that the complexity of the role has increased over time due to factors including student diversity and the impact of social issues. Principals are employed by school Boards of Trustees and while principal eligibility criteria are mentioned in the Education and Training Act 2020, a final version had not been issued at the time of writing this article. Principals therefore come into the role with varying levels of readiness and according to the recent report “would benefit from clearer pathways into principalship, as well as better opportunities to grow their understanding and experience across the range of important parts of the role” (ERO, 2023, p. 10). Another issue of interest is the lack of female principals particularly in

co-educational schools, despite the teaching workforce being comprised of significantly more women than men. In Aotearoa New Zealand in 2019, women made up 63% of the secondary teaching workforce and only 37% of principals (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The recent report ERO (2023) report found that new principals in Aotearoa New Zealand had no obvious pathway to follow in order to prepare them for their roles. This evaluation looked at pathways and supports for new principals as they moved into the role and in their first 5 years. The overarching question was “how do we ensure new principals are set up to succeed?” Survey responses were received from 533 principals of whom 90 worked in secondary schools and the rest in primary and area schools. In terms of preparation, the research found that not all principals were well prepared for the range of activities expected, however, previous leadership experience helped. The most effective form of development and support was post-graduate programmes and coaching and mentoring.

While this report focused on both primary and secondary principals in their first years as principals, two other recent qualitative studies carried out as part of Masters of Secondary School Leadership study looked specifically at pathways to principalship in secondary settings. The first was a study investigating the career structure and actions of recently appointed first-time secondary school principals. The second study sought to explore the enablers and challenges experienced by female principals of co-educational secondary schools to gain insight into their experiences. The literature related to principal impact, attributes, and preparation will be reviewed before the findings of the two studies are shared and discussed.

Literature review

The positive impact of effective principalship in schools is well established internationally (Grissom et al., 2021; Harris & Jones, 2023; Leithwood et al., 2020). Among the practices seen to be central to effective leadership are engaging in interactions with teachers focused on teaching and learning, creating and sustaining a supportive climate, facilitating collaboration between teachers to enhance practice, and strategically managing people and resources (Grissom et al., 2021). Leadership actions contributing to successful schools have similarly been identified as setting direction through building and communicating a vision and goals, building trusting relationships and developing people, developing the organisation and allocating resources appropriately, and strengthening teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020).

While many of the attributes and tasks undertaken by principals are similar in different contexts, differences between principal practice in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand and in other countries have been noted. Two that have been identified in recent research are the autonomy that principals here have, and the strong focus on being “relationally and culturally responsive to diversity and social justice” including commitment to the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Constantinides, 2023, p. 1). While agreeing with the unique bicultural context and wide range of responsibilities because of the autonomy, the ERO report also highlights key differences compared with other countries including the lack of training requirements or qualifications required, no prescribed standards, a large variation in school size and location, and the governance structure of Boards of Trustees rather than a centralised Ministry (ERO, 2023). Previous research carried out with beginning principals in the New Zealand secondary sector found that they often struggle with their roles despite having experience in other senior

leadership roles including as deputy principals (DPs) (Service & Thornton, 2020). Challenges identified in Service and Thornton's study include unexpected occurrences, the myriad of relationships involved, and feelings of isolation. The unsustainable workload of current New Zealand principals has also been recently highlighted (Wylie & Coblenz, 2022).

The importance of preparation for principalship has been the focus of a range of research. Bush and Montecinos (2019) claim that "the case for systematic, specialized training for principals is persuasive and increasingly accepted" (p. 178). These authors advocate for specific preparation for school principals because of the increase in the size and complexity of the role over time, the recognition of the difference in roles of principals and teachers, and the positive effect of preparation programmes. An OECD report on *School Leadership for Learning* (2016) also advocates for principal preparation recommending that training programmes and ongoing professional learning should focus on preparing principals to lead in ways that support effective teaching and learning. The impact of principalship preparation has been discussed by Darling-Hammond et al. (2023), in a recent report commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, which suggests that effective programmes positively influence many aspects of principal leadership practice. Similarly, research from the United States on which programme quality factors directly and indirectly influence leadership learning found that quality leadership preparation does make a meaningful difference to leadership practice (Ni et al., 2023).

There is agreement in the literature regarding elements of effective principal preparation. The Wallace Foundation report identified the following commonalities: learning opportunities that are authentic, meaningful and link to practice; a focus on leading learning, leading people, and leading change; and an emphasis on how to build and sustain collaborative school cultures (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). The value of these programme elements has been emphasised in other research, for example, Cunningham et al. (2019) argue for a shift in emphasis from traditional theory-based training to experiential learning programmes which prepare leaders to analyse situations and decide on appropriate actions and the rationale behind them. Similarly, Fusarelli and Fusarelli (2023) emphasise the importance of aspiring principals having authentic learning experiences visiting other schools as part of this preparation. The importance of learning about people and relationships is also emphasised in research on the International Study of Principal Preparation (Slater et al., 2018), as is the value of focusing on self-care and wellbeing. Recommended programme elements in the Darling-Hammond et al. (2023) report include opportunities for feedback and reflection, support from a professional learning community, and access to mentoring or coaching.

The value of mentoring and coaching has been highlighted in other studies (see, for example, Murphy, 2023; Service & Thornton, 2020; Watts, 2022). For the purposes of this article, coaching will be considered as a practice that mentors engage in to facilitate reflective practice (Hobson & Malderez, 2013; Portner, 1998) rather than as a separate process. Rhodes and Fletcher (2012) highlight the value of mentoring and coaching as tools for increasing aspiring leaders' self-efficacy. Similarly, van Nieuwerburgh et al. (2020) found multiple benefits of coaching for aspiring principals in Australia including being encouraged to reflect and feeling secure to explore possibilities and focus on their own needs and interests. Some authors have however warned that mentoring and coaching will only be effective if there is careful matching, a positive collegial relationship, and

mentors and/or coaches are appropriately trained (Bush & Montecinos, 2019; Watts, 2022).

The lack of mentoring opportunities has been identified as one of the reasons for the disparity in numbers of female principals when compared to the proportion of women in the teaching workforce in Australia (Watterson & Ehrich, 2023). Other factors found in a literature review on barriers, supports and enablers to women becoming principals commissioned by the Post-Primary Teachers' Association included gender stereotyping which may involve framing the principal role as masculine, gendered family responsibilities and roles, women underestimating their leadership skills and capacity, and the lack of structures to encourage and support women into senior leadership roles (Wylie et al., 2020). Watterson and Ehrich (2023) highlight the existence of gender stereotyping in their discussion of the barriers facing women leaders. Bias in the principal appointment process has been found in another Australian study (Spiller, 2023), where an association between the number of female members on a school board and the number of women appointed to principalship was found, and also in an Irish study (Murphy, 2023), which recommends greater diversity of selection panels. Watterson and Ehrich (2023) suggest that women have different career trajectories than men, particularly as they are more likely to take career breaks in order to care for children or elderly parents, and interrupted careers may be disadvantageous when applying for senior roles (Mortimer & Edwards, 2018). The importance of women being mentored and encouraged to apply for leadership roles as they may underestimate their own capacity is widely agreed (Spiller, 2023; Watterson & Ehrich, 2023; Wylie et al., 2020).

This review of the literature highlights the importance of preparing new principals appropriately for their role, something lacking in the current Aotearoa New Zealand context. The importance of understanding how to target appropriate preparation and support for aspiring female principals who are still under-represented in co-educational schools in Aotearoa New Zealand has also been highlighted. The article will contribute to the literature by providing a greater understanding of current pathways including our understanding of how new principals are prepared and what can be done to ensure they have a positive start to their careers as principals.

Methodology

This article draws on the findings of two concurrent studies on pathways to principalship in secondary settings in Aotearoa New Zealand, each with a slightly different focus. Study A investigated the leadership preparation and career trajectory of recently appointed first-time principals while study B explored the enablers and challenges experienced by female principals. Similarities include that both studies used an interpretive qualitative research design which assumes reality is socially constructed rather than observable and focuses on how participants interpret and give meaning to their experiences, and views the researcher as the primary tool for data collection (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016). Both studies involved the use of semi-structured interviews, described as the most frequently used approach within an interpretivist paradigm (Coleman, 2012). This approach kept the interviews focused but gave participants the flexibility to expand their answers beyond the scope of the questions to provide a fuller picture. Both also used a combination of purposive and convenience sampling; purposive sampling in that participants had particular characteristics and convenience sampling in that some of them were known to the researchers (Coleman, 2012). Informed consent was obtained from all participants as

required by the university Human Ethics Committee and it was stipulated that identities would be protected. The approach taken in the next section of the article is that of presenting the findings of each study separately and then comparing and contrasting the enablers and challenges the different principals faced.

In study A, eight first-time principals who had taken up their positions within the last 2 years were interviewed to explore their backgrounds and career decisions at different stages. Interviews were conducted online between July and September 2023, and each lasted 45-60 minutes. They were transcribed using Cockatoo software, with written notes also taken during the discussions. Characteristics of the participants are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Demographics of participants in study A

| Principal | M/F | Ethnicity | Age at appointment | Family status |
|-----------|-----|-----------|--------------------|---|
| A | M | Pākeha | 45-50 | Married with teenage children |
| B | F | Māori | 40-45 | Married with adult children |
| C | M | Māori | 35-40 | Married with young children |
| D | M | Pākeha | 45-50 | Married with teenage children |
| E | M | Pākeha | 50-55 | Married with adult children |
| F | M | Pākeha | 35-40 | Married with young children |
| G | M | Pākeha | 50-55 | Married with teenage and adult children |
| H | F | Pākeha | 45-50 | Married with no children |

In study B, five women who were currently or had been principals in New Zealand co-educational secondary schools were interviewed to gain insight into their experiences of being appointed to and working in this leadership role. The focus was on female principals from state co-educational secondary schools as these schools have been identified as having the greatest gender gap when comparing proportions in the overall workforce with those in leadership (Wylie et al., 2020). Interviews were conducted online or in person

between June and September 2023, and lasted approximated 30 minutes each. Zoom was used to record and transcribe all responses with written notes also taken during the interviews. Characteristics of the participants are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Demographics of participants in study B

| Pseudonym | Ethnicity | Current age bracket | Family status | Principal experience |
|-----------|-----------|---------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Judith | Pākeha | 60+ | Married with children | Over 20 years |
| Marie | Pākeha | 40-50 | Married with no children | 5-10 years |
| Maia | Māori | 40-50 | Married with children | 0-5 years |
| Siobhan | Pākeha | 40-50 | Married with one stepchild | 0-5 years |
| Wendy | Pākeha | 50-60 | Divorced children | 10-20 years |

The principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2016) were used to analyse the data in both studies. This process involved the researchers working through the transcribed interviews looking for patterns and assigning codes to the data. The codes were then grouped together into themes which were reviewed and named.

Findings

The key insights from each of the studies with regard to enablers and challenges will be presented separately in this section before the combined experiences of principals are discussed with reference to the findings from the ERO report and to relevant literature in the next section.

Study A: Enablers

Enabling factors that supported these new principals attaining their first position who participated in study A included previous leadership experience, professional learning opportunities including post-graduate study, and mentoring and coaching support.

Previous leadership experience

All interviewees had substantial experience in education, averaging nearly 22 years, with most holding senior leadership roles for 4-9 years. Acting principal roles provided invaluable preparation, allowing them to demonstrate their leadership capabilities before taking on a permanent position. A willingness to take on various responsibilities early in their careers helped several principals advance. Larger schools offered more opportunities

for middle leadership roles as Heads of Departments or Deans, which many interviewees capitalised on. However, those who moved to smaller schools for senior leadership positions found these environments more conducive to developing a comprehensive skill set. A balance of pastoral and curriculum experience was deemed essential, with many principals initially favouring pastoral roles, which built their relationship and decision-making skills. Those who had specialised in pastoral care sought to fill knowledge gaps by gaining experience in areas like timetabling and curriculum development later in their careers. Most notably, the transition to principalship often followed progression through the DP role. Once in the DP position, aspiring principals tend to deliberately plan their progression to principalship. Interestingly, non-educational experiences proved invaluable for some principals. Half of the interviewees started their careers outside education, with two standing out for overcoming significant life challenges. Principal B, a native te reo Māori speaker, initially faced barriers to entering Teachers' College due to language requirements, leading them to work in the Department of Social Welfare. This experience "toughened" them, instilling a drive to effect change. Similarly, Principal E left school early, worked in construction, and later pursued education to provide stability for his family. These principals reflected that their non-traditional routes equipped them with resilience and empathy, key leadership qualities.

Professional learning opportunities

All the principals interviewed had pursued post-graduate qualifications, with a Masters in Secondary Education Leadership being common. Some completed their qualifications soon after their teaching degree, while others waited until later in their careers. Principals found their postgraduate education invaluable for building leadership skills and applying research-based approaches to school leadership. Overall, principals viewed these qualifications as essential for gaining confidence, refining their leadership values, and succeeding in interviews for principal roles. Aspiring principals were also proactive in pursuing professional learning opportunities, both formal and informal. Sabbaticals, research projects, and further studies, such as in educational law or culturally responsive practices, were among the paths taken to deepen their expertise. Networks such as Deputy and Assistant Principal's Association, the Association of Boys' Schools, and the Independent Schools Association provided platforms for continued learning. Some principals took on external roles, such as examining for NCEA or chairing educational associations, to broaden their perspectives and bring new insights into their schools.

Mentoring and coaching

Mentoring and coaching from experienced principals was seen as essential for aspiring principals. All interviewees mentioned having senior colleagues or mentors who encouraged them to pursue leadership roles, helping them overcome self-doubt and refine their career strategies. This guidance proved invaluable in aligning their personal values with the schools they eventually led, ensuring a good fit between leadership practice and institutional culture. This process was in addition to career encouragement and was focused on preparing individuals for the specific demands of principalship. Mentors often continued to guide their mentees even after moving schools or retiring. Shadowing and networking, such as through the Deputy and Assistant Principals Association or as part of the Master of Secondary School Leadership programme was valued by participants and provided valuable exposure to problem-solving and decision-

making. Observing board meetings was seen as a crucial learning experience. Interviewees identified four key areas essential for running a school: property management, financial planning, Ministry of Education regulations, and human resource management. Mentors often provided aspiring principals with access to these areas, either through participation in board sub-committees or direct involvement in relevant portfolios.

Study A: Challenges

Principals in this study were not specifically asked about challenges they faced, however, some common issues arose in the interviews such as the impact of family commitments and having to relocate to gain a principal position. First-time principals often secured roles in schools resembling their previous institutions in socio-economic status, size, and/or demographic makeup suggesting that boards prefer candidates with experience in comparable educational environments. Most had to move towns for their new roles, and only two were promoted internally. Family circumstances often influenced the timing and location of their career moves. Relocation was often essential, though it required careful consideration of family and lifestyle factors and several interviewees reflected on the challenges of balancing personal life with career advancement, particularly when young children were involved. Several principals shared their experiences of initially failing to secure a principal position due to a lack of preparation. They stressed the importance of having a clear educational vision, understanding the school they were applying to, and tailoring their CVs to the school's needs. Practising interviews and seeking feedback from unsuccessful applications were key strategies for improving future performance. Their advice was to approach the interview process as a mutual evaluation, ensuring that the school's culture and values align with the candidate's moral purpose and leadership approach.

Study B: Enablers

Enabling factors that supported female principals who participated in study B included previous leadership experience, self-confidence, encouragement and support from colleagues and family, mentoring from and networking with other female leaders, and appropriate PLD.

Previous leadership experience

Leadership capability was recognised early in the careers of all participants in study B. Prior to being appointed principal, most spent varying amounts of time in middle management positions, both pastoral and curriculum, before stepping into senior leadership roles. While one participant progressed straight from teaching into a DP role, three others spent time working as educational advisors for organisations such as Teachers Council, ERO and New Zealand Qualifications Authority. Opportunities to gain experience in various leadership positions allowed participants to gain insight into the expectations and responsibilities involved, as well as developing their capability and confidence.

Self-confidence

A key factor that has enabled the career progression of the female leaders in this study was their strong sense of self-belief and 'open to opportunities' attitude. A personal desire for new challenges and a readiness to try new things supported participants to move forward in their careers. Despite challenges such as family commitments and a perceived lack of experience, all these principals stepped up whenever opportunities arose. Two

noted that while they were confident in their own abilities, it was not until they had seen firsthand the kind of principal that they would never be and recognised that they could do a better job, that they began to see themselves in the role of principal.

Encouragement and support

The support and encouragement of partners and other family members was identified by participants as playing a significant role in their personal career progressions. For some, this came in the form of affirmation, encouragement or understanding of the demands of the principal role. For others it was sharing the domestic workload. Judith and Maia were able to focus on being a principal because their partners had flexible jobs which allowed them to work from home and be the primary caregivers for their children.

Professional learning opportunities

Aside from Judith who had no formal leadership training prior to becoming a principal, professional learning opportunities featured in all participants' leadership journeys. Three participants gained master's degrees in educational leadership before their appointment, and four were involved in either 'Aspiring' or 'Beginning' principal programmes. For Siobhan, the Beginning Principals programme enabled her to create a network of like-minded people. Several participants gained valuable insight into demands of principalship when given the opportunity to step up as 'acting principal'. When Siobhan's principal became the lead principal for the Kāhui Ako, they job-shared and this experience helped her to prepare for taking over as principal after his resignation 18 months later. Additional professional learning was accessed by various participants in the form of time spent as the staff representative on the Board of Trustees, one on one meetings with a professional supervisor, and professional learning communities made up of female principals. These PLD opportunities gave participants the chance to develop an understanding of school governance and discuss a wide range of topics such as staff dynamics, crisis management and personal wellbeing prior to and following their appointment as principals.

Mentoring and coaching

Mentoring and professional development opportunities provided support and guidance for all participants in their leadership journeys. Active encouragement and mentoring from principals and other school leaders in the form of resourcing for PLD (financial and time allowance), providing participants with opportunities to gain valuable experience in various senior leadership roles, and encouraging them to apply for leadership roles they had not previously considered themselves ready for was a notable support for all participants. Three of the five women interviewed did not aspire to become principals but rather found themselves in the role because their principal at the time, recognised their readiness and potential, and encouraged them to apply. Careful selection of mentors was essential to ensure positive outcomes. Maia referred to her 'sisterhood' of intelligent female leaders; women she had intentionally sought out and connected with throughout her career. Providing her with a sounding board when she is working through challenging issues, they have been the most empowering enabler for Maia during her time as a principal. Whereas Siobhan was mentored by an experienced female principal from a local school and found this support incredibly beneficial, Marie found the mentor she was

paired with through the Beginning Principal's programme of limited usefulness as he came from a completely different type of school.

Study B: Challenges

Research participants identified several key challenges in their journey to becoming school principals. These included pervasive gender and racial biases, particularly during the appointment process, a lack of PLD and mentoring, difficulties in achieving work-life balance, and the absence of female role models.

Gender stereotyping

Of all the challenges experienced by participants, it was the perceptions and attitudes of others, which were the most pervasive. References to 'old boys' networks and sexist jokes made at principal conferences, an off-hand remark "some chick got it" from a respected educational consultant regarding a recent principal appointment, and Marie's frustration over not being recognised as the principal of her own school because she did not fit the stereotype of 'white, male and wearing a suit', suggest how deeply embedded these beliefs and attitudes are in the New Zealand educational context. Participants reported a lack of appreciation for the unique skills women bring to leadership. Wendy believes that because of this it was not until much later in her career that she recognised that the empathy she had previously thought a weakness, was in fact the very thing that allowed her to negotiate in ways that others could not. Siobhan remarked that one of her biggest struggles had been the constant comparison made between her own more relational leadership style and the 'executive' leadership of the previous male principal. Wendy reflected on the absence of female role models during her leadership journey, struggling to identify with the 'heroic male leader' role model so prevalent in society, as this was not the type of leader she wanted to be.

The women in this study often found they were judged differently to men for the same behaviour, such as being seen as aggressive rather than strong. An example of this was Maia's frustration of being perceived as a "hard b***h," believing that a male leader making identical decisions or exhibiting similar behavior would not face the same judgment. Judith observed that when things went wrong under male leadership someone usually found them another position, but in similar situations women were heavily criticised, and the situation would "end with tears and blood on the carpet." For Maia, the most significant challenge she has faced in her principal journey has been the prejudice she has faced as a "brown woman." Fighting against social norms, both gender and cultural, has been a constant battle: "You have to work twice as hard to prove yourself."

Family responsibilities

A further challenge faced by women is the gender norms associated with family roles and responsibilities. Despite it being illegal in New Zealand for employers to discriminate based on sex or family status (NZ Human Rights Act, 1993), bias towards the appointment of males as principals is evident in the disproportionate number of females currently filling these roles. Judith reported being asked by a female board member how she would manage a role in senior leadership with a young family when being interviewed for a DP position. Although being a mother has not impacted unduly on their own careers, when asked about policies and practices that would encourage more women to become principals all the participants recognised the need for change in this area. Judith observed

that many women's careers trajectories are negatively affected by their taking time out to have children and raise their family, often returning to part-time or relief teaching, further slowing their career progression. Judith, Maia and Wendy spoke of the time-consuming nature of principalship and discussed how this could be a factor which turned women wanting better work/life balance off the role or prevented women with families from pursuing leadership aspirations at all. Maia described the sense of guilt she experienced as a mother and missing some of her children's major milestones over the years. However, this "guilt" has shaped her own leadership, with Maia making a real effort to support her staff to balance their work and family lives. For Wendy, juggling family and post-graduate studies with full-time work made her leadership journey a challenging one. She bore the burden of family organisation and running the household on top of her demanding workload, with minimal support from her husband. Wendy believed that it was only the shared custody arrangement after her separation, that allowed her to meet the demands of her senior leadership roles and to progress into principalship.

Discussion

The findings of both studies A and B align with the three key drivers for principal preparedness identified in the ERO report (2023), that is previous leadership experience, participation in leadership focused post-graduate study, and involvement in coaching and/or mentoring. Both studies make additional contributions to our understanding of these crucial areas because of their focus on the secondary sector, on principal gender, and the identification of challenges, none of which are addressed in the ERO report. The finding of the two studies will now be compared to the findings and recommendations from the national report and to previous literature.

Previous leadership experience

The importance of previous leadership experience was identified in both studies as well as being seen essential in the ERO (2023) report, with experienced new principals being three time more likely to be well prepared than those who lacked experience. The report found however that experience alone did not prepare principals well for their Tiriti-based and Māori partnership responsibilities. Two recommendations in the report relate to prior leadership experience, firstly that it is "the best pathway to becoming a principal and is strongly encouraged" and that "The Ministry then advises Ministers on making prior leadership experience a requirement for new principals over time and on whether to move to compulsory standards for principals over time." (ERO, p. 101). This suggests experience may be mandated in the future. The importance of relevant leadership experience was also found in previous research into principal preparation (Bush & Montecinos, 2019; Service & Thornton, 2020). Studies A and B found that the form that leadership experience took to also be important in the secondary context with senior leadership positions that encompassed aspects of pastoral and curriculum oversight being seen as necessary. Some interviewees took the view that it was about rounding out what they had missed along the way rather than an equal amount of experience that was essential. Study A in particular found that if a career structure is not carefully mapped and left to chance, leaders may be left with few opportunities when it comes to the applying for principalship. These findings suggest clear expectations regarding expected forms of leadership experience would be helpful to aspiring principals.

Post-graduate study

Only around half the principals in the ERO study had participated in post-graduate study compared to 85% of the combined participants of studies A and B. Given the smaller proportion of secondary principals in the ERO sample, this suggests that post-graduate qualifications may be a more common expectation for secondary as compared to primary school principals, a situation confirmed in personal communication with Tim White, Chief Advisor - Leadership Advisory Programme, Ministry of Education (June 2024). While there are three recommendations in the ERO (2023) report that relate to principal preparation that use terms such as encouraging and empowering future leaders and the provision of “a core programme of development of aspiring principals” (p. 102), these recommendations fall short of supporting post-graduate qualifications. This contrasts with international trends, for example in Canada, the United Kingdom, Finland, Canada, and some Australian states, where principals are required to complete a qualification in school leadership and management, and in other countries such as Japan and Singapore and Japan, where there are structured pathways for prospective school principals (ERO, 2023).

Previous research has identified elements of effective principal preparation programmes (see, for example, Cunningham et al., 2022; Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2023; Grissom et al., 2021), including the provision of authentic and experiential learning opportunities. The networking with and shadowing of other principals is one such opportunity offered as part of a Masters of Secondary School Leadership and was valued by study A participants. Learning about Tiriti-based and Māori partnership responsibilities is of importance in the Aotearoa context (Constantinides, 2023), and was found to be a weakness of new principals (ERO, 2023). However, without policy signalling expectations for preparation programmes, aspiring principals are left to choose from a variety of offering with little guidance.

The importance of enrolment in post-graduate study being encouraged by others was seen across all three studies. Encouragement was provided to many of the ERO and study A and B participants by their principals or by other mentors. Two of the recommendation from the ERO report align with these findings, the fourth recommendation suggesting: “The Ministry of Education work with the profession to encourage and empower existing principals and school boards to develop their emerging leaders” and the fifth, that “The Ministry of Education advises Ministers on how the profession can more systematically identify, support, and encourage prospective leaders, particularly Māori leaders” (ERO, 2023, p. 101). The ad hoc nature of principal pathways was emphasised in the ERO report, and the serendipitous nature of this support was also identified as a possible source of inequity and an area of concern by study participants.

Mentoring and coaching

Aspiring principals’ relationships with mentors were seen as a crucial element of preparation in studies A and B, both in formulating a pathway from teacher to senior leader and also in accessing the ‘inside knowledge’ needed to thrive in a principal role. This aligns with the finding that 67% of new principals in the ERO research had accessed mentoring and coaching and valued its tailored nature and relevance, particularly when working with experienced mentors of their choice who knew them well. The value of learning about principalship through interacting with and observing other principals has been emphasised in previous research (Watts, 2022). While mentors are provided as part of the First Time Principal’s programme (Ministry of Education, 2024), mentoring for

aspiring principals is left to chance, with individuals having to access mentors themselves. The choice of mentor is seen to be crucial for the process to be successful. Previous research in the Aotearoa New Zealand context found that having assigned mentors as part of support for new principals was not always helpful and that the most valuable mentors were people to whom new principals had a connection, who had time allocated, and appropriate skills and training (Service & Thornton, 2020). This aligns with Bush and Montecinos' (2019) assertion that mentor training and careful matching is required for successful mentoring relationships and signals the importance of the choice and resourcing of appropriate mentors. An example of this in practice would be mentors who are Māori for aspiring and beginning Māori principals, a suggestion made in the ERO (2023) report.

Barriers to principalship

As mentioned above, the ERO report did not focus on barriers faced or on the experiences of women principals unlike the studies this article is based on. Barriers to principalship explained in the findings section, including gender stereotyping and work life balance were not addressed, and possible biases in the principal selection process were not considered. Study B found that whether conscious or unconscious, bias towards women is reflected in the widely accepted perception of the principal role. In a field historically dominated by men, leadership is often characterized by attributes generally considered as masculine and the framing of the principal role as 'male' is a challenge for any woman aspiring to this leadership position to overcome. This finding aligns with previous research on barriers to women becoming principals (Wylie et al., 2020).

It is not just the beliefs and perceptions of others that create challenges, women's own beliefs can also be a significant barrier to becoming a principal. The importance of self-confidence was emphasised in study B alongside the value of networking and mentor support. While self-doubt was not something these principals reported experiencing themselves to any extent, one participant in this research referred to the number of job applications that she had read where she could almost see the women talking themselves out the role in their cover letter. She then compared this to those from men who framed their application in a manner that suggested they thought the position was already theirs. This suggests that a significant factor preventing more women from putting themselves forward for principal and other senior leadership roles in schools could be how these women view themselves, a factor identified in previous research (see, for example, Spiller, 2023; Watterson & Ehrich, 2023; Wylie et al., 2020).

Family responsibilities and work life balance were taken in consideration by the principals in studies A and B. How their careers progressed often came down to personal decisions based on location, lifestyle and what was best for their families, and in some cases these decisions resulted in them postponing their principal aspirations. Previous research has indicated that women are more likely to take career breaks than men which may disadvantage them when applying for principalship (Mortimer & Edwards, 2018; Watterson & Ehrich, 2023). This suggests that principals and Boards of Trustees need to be aware of the need for flexibility, the importance of not penalising career breaks, and ensuring the work-life balance of staff is considered.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from the two studies and the subsequent discussion – they have been separated out into recommendations for aspiring principals, recommendations for current principals and Boards of Trustees, and recommendations for policy makers.

Recommendations for aspiring principals

- Ensure you gain experience in a variety of roles, both pastoral and curriculum focused, and also take opportunities to gain knowledge and experience in a range of areas associated with leading and managing a school such as finance, property and human resources.
- Engage in post-graduate study that provides experiential learning and shadowing opportunities, for example a Master of Secondary School Leadership.
- Take opportunities to strengthen your knowledge and capabilities in the area of culturally sustaining and inclusive practice, the area new current principals are least prepared for.
- Access appropriate mentors and networks at different stages of your career who both support and challenge you and help you identify steps towards your desired leadership position.

Recommendations for principals and Boards of Trustees

- Ensure that the Board of Trustees is diverse and representative of the community. Also ensure personal biases which may impede the career progression of women and also minority groups are recognised.
- Actively identify, provide support for, and build the leadership capability of leaders and aspiring leaders and in particular women and Māori, from the early stages of their careers. This can be done through mentoring, opportunities for ‘acting’ positions and enabling access to appropriate leadership focused post-graduate study and/or PLD.
- Consider flexible structures and systems to support access to leadership roles for those with family responsibilities, provide options for better work/life balance, and in particular ensure career interruptions do not disadvantage career prospects.

Recommendations for policy makers

- Finalise and publish the principal eligibility criteria.
- Fund post-graduate study options that address the gaps identified in the ERO report and this research.
- Commission research into the lack of women in secondary school principalship, particularly in co-educational schools. Research participants should include aspiring leaders and unsuccessful applicants.

- Provide anti-bias training for Boards of Trustees to ensure principal selection is more equitable when it comes to women and minority groups.

Limitations

Several limitations of the two studies are acknowledged. The convenience sample and voluntary participation may have introduced bias, as the range of principals and schools represented was limited. There were a limited number of women principals who could be approached to participate in study B, making it difficult to ensure that the participants reflected a range of cultures, ages, experience and location. The reliance on the principals' time could have resulted in brief responses, affecting the depth of the interviews in both studies. Additionally, there was a possibility of interviewees moderating their responses despite assurances of confidentiality, although efforts were made to minimise this risk. These studies provided valuable insights into the career pathways of recently appointed first-time secondary school principals, and female principals in co-educational schools, though the findings are not generalisable to the wider population due to these limitations. Also, this research only addressed the challenges experienced by those who were successful in becoming principals. It did not gain insight into those, particularly women, who had been unsuccessful in being appointed and this is an area that would benefit from attention in future research.

Conclusion

The interviewees in the two studies featured in this article shared similar pathways to becoming principals, despite some differences. The traditional career progression from teacher to middle leader, senior leader, and then principal was evident. Early career involvement and a focus on pastoral care was more common than starting with curriculum-focused roles and time in senior leadership provided a well-rounded view of how a secondary school operates. While principalship was not initially a goal for many, mid-career actions like completing a master's degree, taking on new roles, and shadowing principals helped prepare them for the role. The biggest barrier faced by female participants in this research was the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of others. These included the framing of the principal role as masculine, bias related to their leadership approach or capability, and gender norms related to family roles and responsibility. Bias was particularly problematic during the appointment process. Other challenges included a lack of support (from either family or professionally) and work/life balance. The most significant enabling factor was the support and encouragement they received either professionally (from principals and other leaders) or from their family. This research has contributed to the existing literature by providing confirmation of those factors which had previously been identified as challenges and enablers, but from an Aotearoa New Zealand secondary school perspective. It has also added to the limited research available particularly on the experience of women in leadership. Recommendations that could support future leaders in the journey to principalship for a variety of groups have also been made.

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