

Board of Trustees' Selection Practices of Primary School Principals in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT: This brief overview of my research explores the impact of one aspect of New Zealand's self-managing reforms on the changing and predicted gender profile of the principalship in primary schools. The research in progress is a national study of boards of trustees' selection practices of principals carried out in 2002. It examines how trustees interpret and act upon often contradictory and conflicting official discourses from self-managing policies and Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) legislation, as well as populist discourses mobilised by the media. Using feminist discourse theory (Bacchi 2000) I argue that the reforms have not contributed to a significant shift in the gender diversity representation of the principalship.

In New Zealand today the chances of becoming a principal in a primary school are six times greater for a man than a woman. This is in spite of the fact that women comprise 81.5 percent of the primary workforce, that over 80 percent of D.P.s and A.P.s are women, and that education along with the rest of the public sector has been subject to fifteen years of EEO legislation. Men comprise 60 percent of principal positions in New Zealand primary schools, yet make up only 18 percent of the workforce (Ministry of Education, 2002). This pool is rapidly decreasing as senior males retire and the profession fails to attract high numbers of male recruits (Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003). Despite this trend, boards of trustees in my 2002 research (Brooking, 2003) consistently espoused a preference for male principals.

In this research project I wanted to examine why there has not been a more significant shift in the proportion of women principals since the restructuring reforms. In this overview, I report on the findings of a national study of board of trustees' selection practices, which raises serious concerns about the gendered consequences of these procedures. I argue that there are political, social and emotional costs for men, women and students as a result of boards' decision making processes, especially when competent women are being passed over for less competent men, and young inexperienced men are being appointed to positions for which they are not professionally prepared. This situation also contributes to the break down in career paths and patterns to the principalship, leaving applicants in uncertain territories.

In 1989, New Zealand's restructuring reforms gave boards of trustees unprecedented powers and autonomy to appoint the principal of their choice (Middleton, 1990), more so than any other country with similar self-management policies (Wylie, 2002), and ever since boards have shown a

marked preference to appoint males to the principalship. My research illustrates how boards frequently resort to 'gut instinct' or 'local logics' in their decision making about principals and it also shows how the merit principle appears to have been applied inconsistently in some cases.

Using feminist discourse theory (Bacchi, 1999; Bacchi, 2000). I examine how trustees interpret and act upon often contradictory and conflicting official discourses from self-managing policies and Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) legislation, as well as populist discourses mobilised by the media, in making principal appointments. There were three dominant 'official' discourses that emerged from analyses of relevant policy documents and legislation which were associated with the market, managerialism and equity/social justice. However, the two dominant discourses that emerged from the focus group interviews with board chairs, principals and principal advisors reflected only two of these 'official' discourses when reasons for appointments were discussed. They were discourses about gender and the market.

DISCOURSES OF GENDER EQUITY

The official discourses of equal employment principles, human rights and gender equity were frequently acknowledged in interviews but often quite blatantly disregarded or subverted in subsequent actions or decision making. Comments such as "We appointed the best person to the job..." or "gender didn't come into the decision..." signalled an awareness of the official discourse, but the transcripts also revealed considerable evidence of sexism, gender prejudice against women, homophobia and homosociability, as well as examples of racism and ageism.

The following discussion illustrates the discursive effect of populist discourses around masculinist heroic leadership and its relationship to ideas about discipline, team sports and outdoor education, subverting the official EEO discourse. A preference for male principals was articulated using these competing discourses:

M1 - Gender didn't come into it. Well, O.K. the discipline thing, her size and that type of thing probably would have counted against her with dealing with some of the characters we've got. Some of the board did have a "we want a man, no matter what" attitude ... but a big thing was that he'd actually done a lot of work with young people coming out of prison on an Outward Bound type of course, so that meant that there was a big discipline thing there and ...

M3 - Suit some of your kids! (Laughter)

(Board chair of small school with male principal)

There were a number of other discursive effects that emerged from the official gender discourse competing with 'local logics'. Media provoked moral panic around 'feminised schooling' and 'failing boys' discourses (Lingard, 2003), produced appointment decisions based on role models for boys (Smith, 1999):

F - The connection to the perceived lack of male role models was very much an issue in our community as to why they wanted a male principal. There has to be those male role models.

(Board chair of small school with woman principal)

Redressing the gender imbalance on the staff was a common reason reported by boards who had appointed male principals. This is a clear example where the official EEO discourse is subverted to their own ends. The gender balance of the teaching workforce has become more skewed as older males retire and fewer young men enter teaching every year. This is seen as undesirable because schools, it is widely believed, should be reflecting society.

Populist discourses of women and leadership were drawn upon by boards to justify appointment decisions, sometimes in contention with official discourses of equity as legislated in the Human Rights Act. Aspects such as marital and family status, which it is illegal to discriminate against, were used both positively and negatively to rationalise decisions, in conjunction with the 'local logics' or requirements of the community. One board appointed a man over a single woman because of their concerns for her safety, living alone in the school-house. Asked if they would have had the same safety concerns for a single man, their response was "only if he was homosexual". Another appointed a married woman because she was a settled resident in their community and would provide the much needed stability their school required:

M – We've had six principals in twelve years at this school. This time we wanted to make sure that we would get one that stayed. We didn't want a fly-by-nighter, which a lot of them had been.

(Board chair of small school with woman principal)

An advisor to the board reported why a woman with children won a principal's position over an unmarried woman without children because, "she knows what it's like to be a mother" (Principal advisor). Apart from the illegal status of these reasons under the Human Rights Act it is difficult to imagine males being subjected to this reasoning.

MARKET DISCOURSES

The boards that had been the most profoundly influenced in recruitment procedures by the market discourse, revealed business practices of competition, choice, entrepreneurialism, contractualism and marketing. These were mainly the urban schools, governed by board members who themselves worked in the business world. In the focus groups the chairs of the boards who used these discourses were nearly all high-flying, male, business executives. Some were chief executive officers of their own companies. They were also almost all from high status, high decile, large schools in big cities. The following response from a board chair illustrates how attracting a pool of high quality applicants is necessary to retain the school's competitive edge:

M – ‘We are a decile ten, 720 roll. We had fifteen applicants and I have to say that the majority of them were of a very high standard. It was probably one of the top jobs being offered over the recent months in the market. The standard was high and it was really hard to get down to five, very, very difficult to give them all justice. Quite a challenge really.

(Board chair of large school with woman principal)

Competition is closely aligned with the concept of choice in market discourse, the principle being that choice creates competition. Initially it came as a surprise to find the boards who had appointed women principals to the large schools, such as that just mentioned, espoused the strongest market discourse. This appeared to contradict some past research (Middleton, 1990), where the individualism of the market has been seen to work against women, and where the concept of managerialism is seen as highly masculine (Blackmore, 1993). However, there was an important proviso to this finding, which explains the decisions and which counters the contradiction. All the board chairs stated their appointee was the best person for the job, “but in a disappointing field of applicants”. In other words their choices were limited, so therefore they interpreted this as a lack of competition and a failure of the market.

M1 - We were disappointed with the level of candidates. One person stood out and we found it difficult to even have people almost on the short-list to stack one up against it. It was certainly a problem for us, but we then faced do we re-advertise, and in the end we stuck with the person ...

M2 - We had the same thoughts. It would have just been nice to have actually had somebody else, to sort of say, well there is at least a game to play here. But it wasn't that to be honest.

Int. - So the first question I asked everybody was why did you appoint a woman? In your case it was ...

M3 - The best person got the job. I have to say there was considerable feeling amongst a lot of the parents that they would have actually preferred a male to be appointed.

(Board chairs of large schools with women principals)

The board chairs stated that these women were ‘head and shoulders’ above any other applicant, but the chairs appeared to be surprised and dissatisfied there were not any equivalent male applicants to choose from. It was implied that the women had got the job by default. On interviewing the women, it became clear they were indeed outstanding candidates for the principalship, and of a much higher calibre than the average. Of the eight women, two were enrolled in PhDs, four had or were nearly finished Masters and one had an MBA and had published overseas, which was an interesting business choice. All were constantly professionally reading, all but one had over ten years of teaching experience and senior management experience, and most

had been principals before. One woman who applied for a job won it the second time round after the board had re-advertised, and commented:

F – Then they gave it to me the second time around ... but I get the feeling that they would have liked me to have been a man. They would have liked a male with my background, my qualifications, my knowledge of the community and my profile.

(Woman principal from large school)

CONCLUSION

The results of this research point to some needed policy recommendations around boards' roles in the appointment of principals, as well as structural changes around the pool of applicants that they have available to choose from. The presently unregulated context allows the balance of power to lie more with boards than principal applicants, which does not always appear to result in the best person for the job being appointed.

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