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THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA

Beginning female and male Catholic school principals in Western Australia - it's not simply a matter of gender!

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Abstract

Commencing a principalship for the first time is demanding. Not only must beginning principals cultivate a variety of skills to effectively lead an educational institution, they do so while at the same time experiencing the vicissitudes associated with the newness of the role (Darish, 2006; Walker & Oian, 2006). This study explored the leadership experiences and perceptions of thirteen beginning Catholic school principals in Western Australia. Qualitative data were gathered through thirteen semi-structured interviews and researcher-generated field notes. These data were considered from the perspective of gender; seven of the beginning principals were female and six were male. The research findings were organised under three themes: technical and managerial skills; cultural and personal relationships; and integration of the role of principalship with one's self-identity. An overview of the findings suggest that one's gender may influence particular challenges that beginning principals face, and hence the type of support required. Specifically, how one addresses certain technical and managerial concerns, one's level of self-confidence and one's degree of self-efficacy may be more gender related. However, some needs and challenges appear common across both genders, such as important considerations of familial and collegial support.

Introduction

Who would want to be a beginning principal in an Australian school? The first principalship is often an occasion of substantial challenge. It is challenging due to the very nature of the role *per se*. The principal needs to be "head teacher, chief administrator, creator of the vision, promoter of the cause, public face of the organisation, counsellor to staff, listener to parents, role model for students, and conduit with system authorities" (Lavery, 2011). It is challenging, given that the transition from classroom practitioner to school principal is not simply reliant on an accumulation of pedagogical skills over time. Rather, the skills required of school principalship range from small-scale classroom, educational and management practices, to large-scale leadership capabilities that are required to make real a whole school community's educational goal (Chapman, 2005; La Pointe, Darling-Hammond & Meyerson, 2007). It is challenging because the context in which education is delivered in Australia is presently in a state of change (OECD, 2013). Increasingly, there has been a global emphasis on the performance of schools, within and between education systems, between schools, and between countries (Pont, Nusche & Hopkins, 2008). In addressing these various contexts, the Australian Government has brought about a raft of educational reforms in order to improve educational standards and the quality of the schooling experience (Harrington, 2013).

The beginning Catholic school principal, in addition to contending with the trials of a demanding new role and a moving educational landscape, is required to meet the needs of a leader within the educational apostolate for the Catholic Church (Nuzzi, Holter & Frabutt, 2013). The Catholic Church itself is facing a range of issues in its missionary role. With increasing secularisation and its inherent conflict with gospel values, the once faithful are now questioning religious relevancy in their lives (Rieckhoff, 2014). The Catholic Church is also confronting a shifting landscape with decreasing numbers of clergy and religious, low Mass attendance and parish life participation (Pastoral Life Office, 2011) and the impact of institutional sexual abuse within the Church (Sullivan, 2013).

This research explores the leadership experiences and self-perceptions of thirteen beginning Catholic school principals in Western Australia. It does so from the perspective of gender. Seven of the beginning principals were female and six were male. The epistemology underpinning the research was qualitative in nature, explicitly that of interpretivism. The interpretivist view is one of an empathetic understanding of human behaviour centred on the notion that reality is what is internally experienced and socially constructed through interaction (Bryman, 2008; Schwandt, 1998). Of prime importance are the social meanings that people attach to the world around them.

The theoretical perspective for this research was that of symbolic interactionism. A symbolic interactionist approach assumes that people "transmit and receive symbolic communication when they socially interact" (Neuman, 2011, p. 86). In adopting a symbolic interactionist perspective, researchers are fundamentally concerned with how individuals "cope with, deal with, handle or manage particular phenomena" within the course of their inquiry (Clarke, 2000, p. 4). Much of the research in symbolic interactionism involves the collection and analysis of naturally occurring talk between people, as well as textual analysis of written material. Consistent with a symbolic interactional perspective, this study concerning beginning Catholic school principals sought to explore the perspectives of the female and male participants as they navigated their first principalship.

Conceptual Framework

First-rate principalship is not gender specific (McLay, 2008; Tarica, 2010; Watterson, 2010). While there is a plethora of literature on gender and school leadership, this literature tends to focus on challenges confronting women in attaining leadership positions (Brennan, 2004; Derby, 2013; Coleman, 2012; Marczynski & Gates, 2012; McLay, 2008; Oplatka & Tamir, 2009), rather than concerns confronting male leadership. With respect to this study, three issues highlighted in the literature are addressed: barriers to female principalship, leadership pathway progression for females and males, and opportunities to redress the diminished participation of women in the key school leadership role.

Research suggests that barriers to women undertaking a school principalship fall into two main groups, namely internal barriers that are within one's own agency or control and external barriers that encompass structural impediment (Coleman, 2012; Oplatka & Tamir, 2009; Spiller, 2012; Watterson, 2010). Internal barriers include belief in one's ability to undertake the role of principal. Researchers suggested that women tend to lack the confidence to consider principalship (Oplatka & Tamir, 2009; Spiller, 2012; Tarica, 2010; Watterston, 2010). For example, Watterston (2010) indicated that women tended to "underestimate their own capacity for the position and tended to have unrealistically high expectations of the levels of skills and experiences needed" (p. 3). She suggested that coupled with the lack of confidence to consider the role is the belief that women do not feel ready to apply. Furthermore, Oplatka and Tamir (2009) noted that "cultural scripts that identify feminine attributes as contributing to ineffective leadership" (p. 217) limit aspirations towards leadership. These scripts are reinforced by the dominance of males in leadership roles who model underpinning masculine values and management styles. Oplatka and Tamir suggested that women's lack of aspiration, fear of failure and lack of competiveness and readiness all contribute to these internal barriers inhibiting women from aspiring to leadership positions.

External barriers to principalship include the notion of work-life balance. For example, some women limit their career aspiration on the basis that they believe their family life becomes vulnerable to the demanding nature of the principalship and the perceived time required to do the job (Spiller, 2012). The Commonwealth, State and Territories Ministerial Conference on the Status of Women [MINCO] (2004) echoed this belief. The report from MINCO highlighted the significant role women play in the primary care for their families. Other researchers (Coleman, 2012; McLay, 2008) reiterated these findings and add that women make choices between their careers and domestic life.

Another external barrier resulting in women's reluctance to be school principals is the lack of female role models in the position of principalship. Various authors reported that with diminished numbers of current female school principals there is a shortage of female role models to

inspire women (McLay, 2008; Tarica, 2010; Spiller, 2012). The lack of female principal role models perpetuates the notion that educational leadership requires a masculine nature (Oplatka & Tamir, 2009). A lack of female school principals maintains the socialised norm that underpins the assumptions, beliefs and values highlighting men could be and should be principals (Trinidad & Normore, 2005).

Researchers reported that men tended to aim towards leadership positions early in their career whilst women were less likely to have specific career strategies (Tarica, 2010; Watterston, 2010). For example, McLay (2008) suggested that women "lack career strategies" (p. 360) and are inclined not to aim for principalship at the beginning of their career. Men tend to be very specific in planning their careers and "do whatever it takes to get there as soon as possible" (Watterston, 2010, p. 2). Women, on the other hand, prefer to wait until they believe that they have acquired all of the necessary skills and knowledge that principalship requires before they apply for principalship (Watterston). Tarica (2010) also added that women were often nominated by their principal before they considered themselves in the role of principal. As she states "female principals had only thought about leadership roles when it was suggested by someone else or they had been required to fill in for a short period and found that they enjoyed the role" (p.1). Men, on the other hand, are more proactive in applying for leadership positions (Watterston).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose for the study was to explore the leadership experiences and self-perceptions of female and male beginning Catholic school principals in Western Australia. Underpinning this purpose is the belief that by appreciating specific needs of new leaders in both the professional and personal realms, educational authorities can look towards strengthening leadership preparation and ongoing programs to better support and develop both potential leaders and those serving in the role. In the light of the purpose of the research there was one primary research question: What are the professional and personal needs of female and male beginning Western Australian Catholic

school principals during the first four years of appointment as principal? Underlining this primary research question were three sub-questions:

1. What technical and managerial skills do beginning principals need to acquire?
2. What cultural and personal relationships do beginning principals need to develop?
3. In what ways do beginning principals integrate the role of principalship with their self-awareness?

These sub-questions are drawn from the work of Daresh (2006), which identified mastery of technical and managerial skills, development of cultural and personal relationships and integration of the principalship with self-awareness as core to a successful beginning principalship.

Significance

The significance of this study lies in the challenge confronting educational authorities to recruit, support and sustain educational leaders. In identifying gender-specific professional and personal needs of beginning principals, there is an opportunity to provide appropriate professional support that is explicitly designed for new leaders, thus enabling these women and men to more effectively undertake their role. In addition, it is anticipated that the empirical data collected from the research will highlight appropriate forms of professional development for school leaders, and provide opportunities for examining succession planning for leadership not only in Catholic schools, but also other educational systems and sectors.

Methodology

Participants

This study sought explicitly to explore the experiences and self-perceptions of female and male beginning principals newly appointed to Catholic schools in Western Australia. Of the seven female and six male participants, nine were primary principals (five female and four male) and four were secondary principals (two female and two male). At the time of the study, two were in their second year, ten were in their third year, and one was in her fourth year as principal.

Context

The participants' schools were located across the four dioceses in Western Australia: three in the Broome diocese; two in the Geraldton diocese; five from the Archdiocese of Perth; and three from the Bunbury diocese. The schools varied in size: the three primary schools in the Broome diocese had between 40 and 100 students; the primary schools in the Geraldton and Bunbury dioceses had between 90 and 120 students and the four secondary schools had between 800 and 1110 students. Figure 1.1 illustrates the Catholic diocesan regions in Western Australia and the number of Catholic schools within each diocese (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2013).

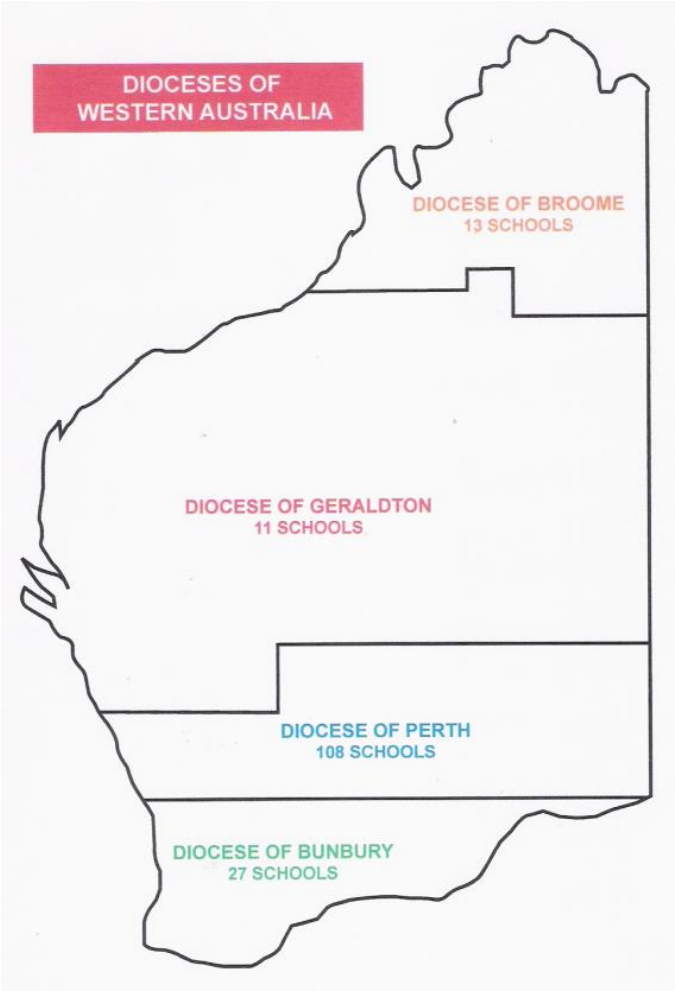

Figure 1.1 *Western Australia Catholic diocesan regions and the number of Catholic schools located with the region*. [Source: Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2009)

Limitations

One potential limitation of the research is the sample size of participants (13 beginning principals from a population of 29 at the time of the research). Readers may need to consider this fact when considering the recommendations proffered.

Data Collection

Data collection methods entailed the use of semi-structured face-to-face interviews, document analysis and researcher generated field notes from observation. The length of the interviews was between 45 and 60 minutes. An interview guide was used as the basis for the interviews. The interview guide was initially piloted with an experienced, current primary school principal who has worked with beginning principals and two university academics with extensive secondary school leadership experience. The refined interview guide was then re-tested with two experienced school leaders. This final version of the interview guide was used with the participants (Appendix A). The interviews were recorded and transcribed *verbatim* by one of the researchers. The transcriptions were subsequently made available to participants as a process of member checking (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014).

The documents which were analysed included leadership framework programs for aspirants and principals, Catholic Church documents pertaining to Catholic education, school newsletters and brochures, and policies relating to principalship requirements. These documents were used predominantly to inform the context of the research. Research generated field notes were written during and after the interviews and offered additional information to participants' responses. The field notes contained observations of the participant's office, the demeanour of the participant as well as other elements that appeared applicable.

Data Analysis

An interpretive analysis of the research findings sought to ascertain needs of beginning female and male principals within the first term of their appointment. Qualitative approaches to analysis provide ways of discerning, examining, comparing and contrasting, and interpreting

meaningful themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). Qualitative data management and analysis have a myriad of suggested processes and procedures that draw out the meaning generated by those involved in the research area. The data for this study were managed and analysed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This model consisted of three main components: data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. These three highly interactive and iterative processes occur before data collection begins, during the research design and planning phase, during data collection and post data collection.

Results

The results to the three sub-questions are presented in three sections. The first section entails the responses of the seven female participants. This section is followed by the responses of the six male participants. The final section is a summary of the key themes emerging from the data.

Female participants

What technical and managerial skills do newly appointed principals need to acquire?

Data from the interview responses of the seven female principals highlighted three distinct themes relating to technical and managerial skills: lack of financial understanding, concerns with staffing and the transition into principalship.

All seven female participants were challenged by their lack of financial understanding in administering a school budget. Coupled with this concern was the management of the school board whose primary function is the oversight of the school's finances. Five of the seven female participants commented on their lack of expertise and confidence in dealing with the financial management of the school. One perceived that her strength and primary role lay in the educational domain, yet she saw herself being drawn from this domain into the unfamiliar territory of finance. She commented: "the area of finance really weighs me down; it takes me away from other areas." A second observed: "For me the challenge is the whole area of school boards and to be fully cognizant of the financial management of the school." This particular participant further stated: "I recognize understanding finances is a deficiency in my understanding…the reality is that you are running a

multimillion dollar budget which you are responsible for." A third participant, who commented on her personal strength in mathematics and interest in finance, still struggled in the area. She noted: "budgets are still a challenge for me despite my mathematical bent and interest in this area… there needs to be more support." A fourth participant captured the collective feeling of the five female participants by stating: "I think the financials are the biggest area of poor understanding for beginning principals."

All seven female principals highlighted staff issues as a significant concern for them as beginning principals. Examples of staff issues were diverse, ranging from professionalism of the staff and the quality of teaching, to building the capacity of inexperienced teachers. Two participants had to deal with issues regarding poor teaching performances. One participant reported on her responsibility in dealing with a staff performance issue, stating:

> When I find that a teacher is being unjust and doing the wrong thing by the students, then it is my responsibility to deal with it. These are the yucky bits! But I don't shrug these bits – I have to look after the students and the staff member. If the staff member is in the wrong role, then I need to address this. This is the hardest part.

Two participants began their principalship with new and inexperienced leadership teams. The inexperienced team was challenging for both, particularly as they too were new to their role. One noted: "My whole leadership team is brand new. They don't have the background in policies or strategic thinking. Their inexperience required me to support them considerably." One participant commented on the demand of having inexperienced teachers on staff. She reported: "My current staff are full of graduates who don't have experiences to really know what needs to be done. The challenge is there for me to ensure that I am in the classroom supporting them."

Five of the participants identified three areas of concern relative to the theme of transition into the principalship. The first related to the participants' shift from deputy/ assistant principal to principal. The second was to do with the handover from the outgoing principal to the new principal. The third area was concerned with the quality and content of the new principals' induction program presented by the Catholic Education Office.

Four participants commented on the challenge of moving from the deputy/assistant principal role to that of principal. These participants acknowledged that it took a considerable adjustment to appreciate the enormity of the role and felt bereft at times in understanding the work of principal. One participant's comment captures the collective sentiments of the others when she stated: "It is far more complex than you can ever imagine... the reality of the situation is very different to the perception of the position."

Five of the participants spoke emphatically about the importance of the handover process between the exiting principal and the new principal. Unfortunately their experiences were generally negative. The negativity was primarily drawn from two areas: firstly, the lack of support from the exiting principal; and secondly, uncertainty in not knowing what is to be discussed at the handover meeting. As one participant reported:

> I had an appalling handover... I walked in on January 4 cold. The previous principal went overseas and did not meet with me. There were some people who did not want me here and were going to put up all sort of obstacles and of course there was a secret service mentality and I did not know what was going on in the place.

A second participant noted: "I spent four days at the school prior to my first year. I look at them as wasted days because I did not know what to look for or what to ask for."

All participants commented on the value and benefits of the formal induction program for newly appointed principals presented by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia [CEOWA]. Common to their experience was the sense of collegiality with other new principals and the importance of meeting key CEOWA personnel. Whilst collegiality was seen as a strength of the program, two participants commented on the importance of distinguishing between the needs of primary and secondary principals. One participant articulated this distinction: "Putting primary and secondary principals together just doesn't work because you are talking remote Kimberley schools mixed with small country primary schools and large metropolitan secondary schools." Three of the participants also commented on the need to strengthen the financial dimension of the program. In particular, one participant pointed out the timing of the financial in-service should coincide with the

period during which one submits a budget: "Around budget time, it makes sense to have some sort of presentation – linking in some in-servicing to what is actually happening."

What cultural and personal relationships do newly appointed principals need to develop/ navigate?

Underpinning the issue of Socialisation skills are the cultural and personal relationships inherent in the role of principalship. The data from the seven female participants revealed four dominant themes: culture of the school community, collegial support, family support and Catholic Education Office support.

Three participants reflected on the need to have sound knowledge of key issues affecting the school community prior to commencing their principalship. One participant stated: "I think that one needs full disclosure of what is actually happening at the school." Another reiterated this belief: "If you had a better knowledge of the culture it would hold you in good stead as situations arise". The need to have a good understanding of the current milieu in which the participants began their principalship was acknowledged as an important preparatory requirement for taking on school principalship.

All female participants appreciated and acknowledged the need for peer support as they began their principalship. They recognised that being able to discuss various issues with a peer principal was beneficial in that they received wise advice and support from their mentor and peers. One participant commented: "I have had very good support from my mentor... I have been encouraged by email and phone calls." Each of the participants appreciated the commitment these principals provided in supporting them. They acknowledged the additional demand placed on their peers to mentor them. One stated: "But I think that these people are running their school too and they have their own job to do." Another remarked: "One of my female colleagues has been outstanding. My knowledge of the financials has basically come from her. I spent a few days with her and she helped me hugely."

Four of the seven female participants commented on the support of their families as being crucial to overcoming challenges. One participant appreciated the support of her husband during a particularly challenging day. She commented: “I remember some of those difficult days. I was grateful to have my husband here. The fire was lit, he cooked dinner and listened.” Another reiterated this sentiment and stated: “My husband is with me and his support has been tremendous – we are in it together.”

Three participants also commented on the relationship they had developed with the regional Catholic Education Office personnel. The support from the Office was considered worthwhile and important. The comment from one of the participant’s exemplified the appreciation and level of support given to the school principal: “The regional officer [RO] was outstanding and very supportive. The RO went into classes and modelled to the teachers what was to be done. They felt very comfortable with the RO. The teachers did not feel checked upon.”

In what ways do newly appointed principals integrate the role of principalship with their own self-awareness?

Foundational to the issue of self-awareness was the ability of participants to identify themselves as principals who lead a school community. Data from the seven female participants revealed three key issues: the need for resiliency, the notion of principalship as a vocation and the importance of confidence.

Five participants believed that one had to be resilient to deal with the demands of the role of being a principal. One commented on the need for a certain level of toughness. She stated: “Be prepared to be well and truly knocked off your perch. You have to be well and truly resilient.” Another participant recognised that the work of being the school leader presented challenges; however, she acknowledged that the challenges need to be put in perspective. She commented:

> What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. This has been my mantra all year. I think that this is one of the kinks in the road and I will get around it or go through it. I am pretty resilient. But this comes from a sense of keeping things in balance.

This comment was reiterated by another participant who stated: "At the end of the year, you hear half a dozen criticisms and you take it on board. You are the nearest kicking board." Further, she noted, "you need to continually have to try to keep a balance and make sure you don't get sucked into the pool of despair."

The theme of vocation stemmed from the participants' family upbringing and educational background. All seven female participants were educated within Catholic institutions, with all completing post-graduate studies at the local Catholic university. Each noted the significance of faith formation within their family. As one stated: "For me my Catholic upbringing is very important in that it has shaped me as a person. I also believe that I am a Catholic educator not just an educator." Another participant also echoed this centrality of faith:

> I had a Catholic upbringing and went to Catholic schools. It is just part of who I am. I have never ever considered not being in a Catholic school. Being able to lead a faith community is a privilege. If I am instrumental in instilling the life of Jesus into the life of children, what more is there?

A further participant commented: "I think that it's the fact that you can express your faith... you can talk about your faith... you can help young people to develop their faith. These are important to me." A third participant noted that through her principalship, she had grown in her faith: "I feel that I have grown in wisdom and the experience has made me look at my relationship with God."

Four of the seven female participants reflected on their confidence in the role of principal. One participant commented that her confidence was challenged and it affected her greatly. She stated:

> The job is draining and hard going. But I am my worst enemy. I expect perfection. At a personal level I need to be more confident in myself. I can be easily shaken. I am sensitive to people's criticism and I take it to heart.

Another participant appeared to harbour doubt in her capacity as principal. She commented: "there is a lot of self doubt... I sometimes think that I am a fraud in the role. My deputy once said to me to stop beating myself up."

Two participants identified the Women in Leadership [WIL] program, conducted by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australian for leadership development for women, as key to reinforcing their pursuit of principalship. As one participant reported: "What really cemented my aspiration for principalship was the WIL program... it gave me the confidence to apply for principalship".

Male participants

What technical and managerial skills do newly appointed principals need to acquire?

Data from the interview responses of the six male principals highlighted two distinct themes under the issue of technical and managerial skills. These themes were the bureaucratic demands of the position and the importance of delegation.

All six male participants commented on the bureaucratic demands of the principalship. The participants remarked on the increasing accountabilities placed upon them in a variety of areas. These accountabilities included government compliance issues, system requirements and local demands such as teacher housing. Whilst these accountabilities were challenges for each participant, more than half commented on enjoying the rigour of the demand. One participant stated: "In terms of the demand of the role, I enjoy the challenge". Another spoke on the demand of managing the school finances and stated: "the financials of the school have been extremely challenging, but I have enjoyed the challenge.

A second theme that the male participants highlighted focused on the managerial skill of delegation. Four participants commented on the need to delegate to staff in order to not only build staff capacity, but also to avoid taking on additional responsibilities. The following comments by one participant express the importance of delegation: "As principal you have to think more globally; you therefore need to delegate to others – it is not abdicating your responsibility, you are enabling others."

What cultural and personal relationships do newly appointed principals need to develop/ navigate?

Within the issue of cultural and personal relationships, three themes were drawn from the six male participants: collegial support, family support and Catholic Education Office support.

All six male participants noted varying degrees of collegial support. Four participants experienced positive, helpful and sincere support and interest from their peers. This collective experience was exemplified by one participant's comments: "I don't have trouble accessing my colleagues for support...you are part of a collegial group." However, the same participant noted that "you pick your mark". He explained that you access certain colleagues for certain areas of support. The particular example given by this participant was in the area of information technology. His belief was that some principals were more familiar with technologies than others.

Four of the participants recognised their family as a main source of support. Two participants commented on their respective wives' support in their decision to pursue principalship in country and remote areas. The participants noted that their pursuit of principalship would mean uprooting and re-establishing the family unit. One commented on his concern for the family. He stated: "I have a young family, and my first and foremost concern is for my wife and children. I know that it is a big commitment on my wife." Another issue reported from one participant was the precarious situation families are placed in when relocating and establishing new friendship networks:

> My wife is a member of the community and is developing friendships with various people. I have to be careful in what I say to her so that it doesn't impinge on her friendships. There are certain things I talk to her about, but others that I wouldn't.

All six male participants acknowledged and appreciated the support given to them by the CEOWA. The type of support included problem solving issues related to curriculum delivery, summative appraisals on staff, teacher housing and sounding board for areas of concern. One participant commented that it was important that he be able to access the relevant CEOWA person to discuss confidential matters. He found that there was no one on his staff with whom he could

discuss confidential issues. Whilst each participant accessed the services in a variety of areas, they all viewed the support as necessary and an important function of the CEOWA. This statement by one participant was shared collectively: "I see that the role of the CEOWA is to help me."

In what ways do newly appointed principals integrate the role of principalship with their own self-awareness?

The six male participants' responses presented three themes relating to self-awareness: career aspirations, need for self-efficacy and position of authority.

All of the six male participants highlighted their career journey to principalship. Four participants reflected on their leadership development over their teaching career leading to their appointment as principal. In each of these four responses, all realised very early on in their teaching career that their pathway would lead to a principalship. One participant captured the sentiment of the others and stated: "All through my teaching career, except the first year, I have been in a managerial role. Principalship was a natural progression for me. I had in the back of my mind to become principal." Another participant commented on his disappointment at not being appointed to principalship in the school in which he was acting principal:

> I started applying for principalship and wasn't successful. In one school, I was acting principal and then I applied for the substantive role and was not successful. I was very disappointed. I felt like I got a kick in my gut because I was working extremely hard. I was glad when I was appointed to another school.

All six participants remarked on the need for self-belief or self-efficacy in their ability to fulfil their role as principal. One participant, who realised his early career aspiration towards principalship, stated: "Before I started to apply for principalship I felt that I had to start thinking like a principal. My teaching career has always inspired me to climb the ladder." Another noted the need to be confident and trusting in one's judgement in making decisions. This was further developed by a third participant who commented: "One needs to have the confidence that they have developed the wisdom over the years." One participant offered advice to aspirant principals. He stated:

> My advice to new principals is that you need to adopt a philosophy that what is a problem today, isn't going to be one next week. Don't get weighed down. This doesn't mean you have to be callous or cold hearted; for the tough things that have to happen you deal with them justly, fairly and openly.
> Four participants remarked on the influential nature of the principalship.

This influence was highlighted by another participant in the following comment: "the principal's role is tremendously powerful and influential". The same participant remarked that he experienced this realisation over time in the role of principal. It was also noted by the same participant that the staff, students and parents saw the role of principal before they saw him as a person.

Summary

Table 1.1 provides a summary of key themes emerging from the data.

Table 1.1

Summary of key themes

Theme	Female	Male
Technical and managerial skills	Financial understanding Staffing issues Transition into principalship	Bureaucratic demands Importance of delegation
Cultural and personal relationships	Culture of the school community Collegial support Family support Catholic Education Office support	Collegial support Family support Catholic Education Office support
Self awareness	Need for resiliency Principalship as a vocation Importance of confidence	Career aspiration Need for self-efficacy Position of authority

Discussion

Similarities between the female and male participant responses occurred predominantly within the area of cultural and personal relationships. Participants from both genders identified support from family and colleagues as vital in enabling them to operate as a principal. Both genders recognised the essential support role that family played in dealing with the challenges encountered in the principalship. The male participants however, acknowledged the impost of relocating their wives and children to their new school. The female participants did not raise this issue because their personal circumstances did not warrant comment. Three were not married and the others had grown-up families and their husbands were supportive of relocating to country or remote areas. The male and female participants both recognised the value of collegial support. All participants appreciated the practical advice and professional interactions colleagues gave, particularly in challenging times.

The key differences between the female and male participant responses lay within the dual areas of technical and managerial skills and self-awareness. Within the area of technical and managerial skills, the seven female participants identified challenges in dealing with the finances, school boards and transitioning into the new role. A possible explanation as to why the female participants reported on these challenges may lie in the tendency of women having unrealistically high expectations of the skill levels and experiences needed to lead in these unfamiliar areas (Watterson, 2010). Whilst the female participants felt inadequate in dealing with these operational matters, they in fact managed these areas successfully.

Male participants, however, commented on the bureaucratic nature of the position with excessive accountabilities placed upon them. Male participants also reported on the value of delegating some responsibilities to key staff. Their view on delegation was twofold: firstly, it built capacity of the staff, and secondly, it enabled the principal to focus on more pressing matters by alleviating them of less important tasks. None of the female participants mentioned the idea of delegating responsibilities to staff. Rather, the female participants reported the tendency of doing

the majority of tasks themselves rather than burdening their staff. In attempting to explain the difference in responses between male and female participants in the area of delegation, literature suggests that women can lack confidence in their ability to lead and therefore find it difficult to ask staff to pick up particular responsibilities (Oplatka & Tamir, 2009; Spiller, 2012; Tarica, 2010; Watterson, 2010).

Male and female participants alike identified the issues of self-confidence and self-efficacy within the area of self-awareness. However, the female participants reported a lack of confidence in not only seeking principalship but also when first appointed. Female participants reported low levels of confidence, particularly when dealing with challenging matters. There are two possible reasons why the female participants expressed a lack of confidence, particularly in seeking principalship. The first includes the under-representation of female principals as role models, which promotes the socialised norm that underpins the assumptions, beliefs and values that men could be and should be principals (Trinidad & Normore, 2005). The second is a lack of career strategies early in the woman's career (McLay, 2008). On the other hand, male participants reported self-efficacy and self-belief as important attributes in the leadership role. The male participants acknowledged that it was important to be confident in their role as they saw their authority as being definitive and influential.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research highlights diverse needs and challenges that female and male principals experience as they embark on their first principalship. These needs and challenges are not simply a matter of gender. Certainly, it would appear that one's gender can influence certain challenges that beginning principals face, and hence the type of support needed. In particular, how one addresses certain technical and managerial concerns, one's level of self-confidence and one's degree of self-efficacy may be more gender related. However, some needs and challenges are common to both genders, such as important considerations of familial and collegial support. As a consequence of the results and discussion, the authors offer three recommendations for consideration.

First, organisations tasked with principal preparation factor in opportunities for gender specific programs which more directly relate to the needs of female and male aspirants. Second, system authorities explore appropriate forms of system and collegial support for beginning principals. Moreover, system authorities need to ensure that such support is forthcoming and readily available for beginning principals. Third, tertiary institutions and system authorities undertake further research, preferably in partnership, to develop a comprehensive database of challenges and needs of beginning principals, both in Western Australia, and nationally.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. What was your 'road' to principalship and why travel this road?
2. What are your main beliefs and values about Catholic school leadership?
3. What has motivated you to become a Catholic school principal?
4. The Catholic Church has particular demands on Catholic school principals. What is your understanding of these demands? How have you responded to these demands? How have you prepared yourself to be a leader of the Catholic school?
5. How have you prepared yourself for the educational demands currently being experienced in schools? Individual/personal; professional development; external
6. Considering experiences thus far, what have been the highlights as principal?
7. What have been your success stories?
8. What are the areas of challenge that you have encountered in your role?
9. Was there a significant moment when you realized that you are the principal in your first year?
10. What has the transition been like from your previous role to the one of principal?
11. Who has given you the greatest support in your new role? Who have been your role models of principalship?
12. What type of support has the CEOWA given you as principal? Was this request for support of your making or need or didn't you have a choice?
13. What or who are your key supports in the role?
14. What support networks have you accessed (professional associations, mentors, colleagues)?
15. With regard to your personal relationships, have these changed as you have assumed the role of school principal?
16. Do the professional development programs offered by the CEOWA meet your particular needs?
17. What support have your colleagues given you since taking up your appointment?
18. Do you believe that you were adequately prepared for your principalship role through the road to principalship?
19. If you were to develop the Induction Program for newly appointed principals what five main areas would you definitely have in the program?
20. In recalling your experience of the Principal Induction Program, what aspects would you consider the most helpful / least helpful?

21. With regard to the four domains of principalship in the Catholic school, how well prepared were you for being the:
    a. Theological leader
    b. Educational leader
    c. Pastoral leader
    d. Administrative leader
22. What organizations do you belong to beyond the school fence and why?
23. If you were to have a metaphor for your school principalship, what would it be and why choose this?

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