Expectations of Successful Female Small School Principals

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ABSTRACT: This paper forms part of a larger study investigating the experiences of twelve female teaching principals in small rural and isolated schools in their first year as school principal. The schools to which they were appointed had student enrolments ranging from 12 to 86 and were in geographic areas with no township, where the school building was the only structure, to small towns of less than 500. This study sought to discover the expectations stakeholders in small schools had of successful female teaching principals and the expectations teaching principals had of themselves. Interviews with both cohorts indicated a shared expectation that the teaching principal would come equipped with excellent communication skills, sound teaching knowledge and the ability to establish and maintain community relationships. Additional expectations from teaching principals related to their leadership, meeting systemic administrative requirements and balancing their work and personal lives. For stakeholders additional expectations included being organised in relation to isolation and having positive personal characteristics.

Introduction

The role of school principal has evolved into a complex and demanding role with internal and external pressures and political agendas. Principals are confronted on a daily basis with the overall organisation of the school; ensuring teachers provide legitimate teaching in the classroom; being instructional and curriculum leaders; developing an educational vision; providing whole school discipline; being public relations and communications experts; budget analysts; and facility managers (Davis et al., 2005). All this at the same time as ensuring that the demands, expectations and pressures from parents, staff, other stakeholders and government systemic requirements are met.

Two Australian studies conducted two decades apart reported similar findings in relation to the expected characteristics of successful school principals. They included well honed human resource, communication and public relations skills; the ability to encourage all stakeholders to be involved in a collaborative decision making process but take ultimate responsibility for the

outcome; build a climate of trust; demonstrate empathy, sensitivity, honesty and openness; accept criticism but maintain a sense of humour and a high level of resilience, while remaining tough minded; and having good judgement. The requisite professional qualities included leadership; a sound knowledge of learning processes and instructional design; and the ability to initiate change and innovation by thinking creatively and laterally while encouraging innovation and risk taking (Duignan et al., 1985; Gurr, Drysdale & Mulford, 2005).

Research into expectations of successful school principals has not been restricted to Australia. In an international study Leithwood (2005) reported the basic factors that contributed to successful school leadership included setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organisation. However, in extrapolating from these three factors Leithwood questioned whether internal factors such as the principal's gender, age or experience and external factors such as school size, location of school in urban or rural areas and government versus non-government school could impact on the principal's success. He provided no answers, but commented:

> ... studies tell us little about how variations in context are related to variations in leadership practices, the kind of evidence that is needed if we are to become clearer about the factors stimulating successful leadership practices (p. 622).

The issue of context was raised earlier by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) who proposed that the unstated but widely accepted values and norms of the community had an impact on how the principal was perceived and how he/she was expected to behave. Gurr et al. (2005) also recognised the value of context when they concluded from their research, "Most themes of successful school principalship were found to be embedded in the context in which they take place" (p. 542).

This current research sought to provide contextual insight into what makes for a successful school principal by investigating female small school principals in rural and isolated communities. Until recently most studies into the multi faceted role of school principals neglected one cohort of principals - the teaching principal. Teaching principals in small schools are required to do all that is expected of non-teaching principals, as well as tackle the one task schools were designed to do – teach. In one teacher schools that means instruction from preschool to Year 7, sometimes with only one or two students in each grade, but every grade needing to be accommodated.

Recently this lack of research into the complex role of teaching principals has been addressed by Australian researchers such as Lester (2003) who investigated the dilemmas and tensions faced by Queensland teaching principals; Clarke and Wildy (2004) and Wildy and Clarke (2005) who studied the challenge of building relationships with staff and community in small schools in Western Australia and Queensland; Springbett (2004) who uncovered tensions between personal and community values for newly appointed principals in Western Australia; and Clarke and Stevens (2004) who considered the context of young, single females in small communities. The outcome of these studies has been to draw attention to the unique circumstances faced by teaching principals and to draw attention to the role relationships play in rural and remote small school communities. However there continues to be limited research informing our understanding of how female teaching principals conceptualise their role of leader in a small school community. For the most part the reported findings into small schools has not been gender specific and as such failed to acknowledge the contextual differences for females beginning their educational leadership careers.

Role of gender

Literature beneficial to experienced principals abounds and there is a steadily growing body of work relevant to the beginning principal (Brock & Grady, 2004; Caldwell, 2006; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2006; Grady, 2004; Hall & Mani, 1992; Loader, 1997; McEwan, 2003; Parkay & Hall, 1992). However, the majority of literature on beginning principals is based on males in urban areas. The literature assumes that the perspective of principals from this cohort can be either transferred to beginning female principals in isolated areas, or neglects the area entirely. The objective of this research is to close the gap in understanding the dynamics between a female teaching principal and a small community and to highlight the expectations surrounding her performance.

The way females and males are viewed outside schools in the broader community dictates the roles assigned to them inside schools. Restine (1993, p. 20) quoted the expression "women teach and men lead" to demonstrate society's stereotypic image of the genders within the education system. In small and usually isolated communities social mores are frequently more pronounced than in urban areas, resulting in the differences in expectations of the genders being distinctly pronounced. Schaef (1992) noted that if a woman is not perceived to be fulfilling her prescribed female role in the local community, she can be made to feel guilty, especially by other women. In commenting about the differences in perceptions of the genders Schaef claimed:

> Men who stand up for themselves are competent and assertive; women who do the same
> are obnoxious and aggressive. Men who openly express different opinions to women are
> forthright and honest; women who do the same are castrating bitches who have no regard
> for the fragile male ego (Schaef, 1992, p. 78).

In an investigation into female school principals in rural areas of Canada, Wallin and Sackney (2003) concluded that communities were willing to accept a female principal if her personal values and ideology matched the community, or if the community values were not opposed. They added that in small communities anonymity was not an option and an individual's values were quickly perceived and either accepted or not after only a brief period of grace. If the new principal deviated from community expectations she may be perceived as unsuitable (Brunner & Duncan, 1998; Duncan, 1995; Duncan & Seguin, 2002). On the other hand males tended to be accepted even if they opposed the conventional norms (Bjork, 2000; Grogan, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1999).

Two separate studies of female principals in the United States consistently found that higher expectations were held by school stakeholders for female principals than for their male colleagues (Smith & Hale, 2002; Tellerico, 2000). Results from the Smith and Hale (2002) study indicated that teachers, parents and students approached female principals with a different perspective than they did male principals. Parents assumed females would be easier to intimidate than males and students viewed female principals as easier to manipulate. Noteworthy in Smith and Hale's research was the finding that female principals met greater resistance from female staff at the school than from male staff.

In a discussion paper outlining her own experiences as a female school principal, Sungaila (1982) drew attention to the expectations communities have for female principals by observing that society expects females to be nurturing, caring and supportive. She added that society expected a female to base decisions for action in "... the soft-hearted effulgence of feminine compassion, not any hard-headed evaluation of competence" (p 98). A similar premise was

presented by a female principal in McMurtrie's (1997) study. This principal acknowledged the difficulties for females in obtaining a principalship in a small community. She attributed the difficulty to 'prevailing community attitudes' by saying:

> I know those communities wanted a man for the job of principal. They could see the big brawny male because women can't discipline. Seems more a barrier in country towns because there are still a lot of gender issues that exist in country and rural areas (McMurtrie, 1997, pp. 20-21).

In a study into Equal Employment Opportunities commissioned by the Department of Education in 1996 findings highlighted established principals' perceptions of community attitudes toward female principals, based on their own experiences. One female principal stated:

> I have parents come to me and say: 'My child's in Year 7 next year and I want him to be taught by a good strong male' (p. 36).

Conversely, in her Western Australia study of beginning teaching principals in small school communities, Wildy (2004) found regardless of gender the most successful principals were those who took an active role in the community. While a community may have preferred a young male with a family in the role, it was more often the preparedness of the individual to immerse him/herself in the local culture that indicated success. Wildy reported that one of the female principals in her study did not participate in local activities and was not interested in taking a leadership role in the community. Another female, despite having career aspirations was not prepared for the complexities of the community and had not immersed herself in it beyond the school's activities. Neither of these female teaching principals was rated as being successful.

Limited literature exists relating to gender based differences for beginning female principals in these small communities. By ignoring the gender differences, newly appointed female principals do not have the opportunity to learn from research findings specific to their idiosyncratic needs and are expected to accept generalised or aggregated findings as fact. It is the contention of this current research that the experiences of both genders should not be generalised as a one size fits all and hence accepted as reality (Dunshea, 1998).

Relationships with stakeholders
Literature on principals' relationships has commonly focused on the interactions between the non-teaching principal and teachers in larger schools (Beatty, 2000; Blasé & Blasé, 2003; Blasé & Kirby, 2000; Bredeson & Johansson, 2000; Uchiyama & Wolf, 2002). What has been neglected is how positive collegial relationships between the teaching principal and other staff, such as administrative support staff and teacher aides in a small school, along with parents, P&C committees and the local community, have been established and maintained. The state government employing body, Education Queensland, has its own set of expectations around those relationships, as do each of the individuals involved.

The value of support staff in small school communities has been acknowledged by Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk and Mulford (2001) who researched school/community relationships within a small town. They reported that ancillary staff were most likely to be long-term residents of the community, with established homes and a family base in the area and as a result had built trust and respect within the community. Johns et al. (2001) reported that support staff often built the social bridge between school and the community.

Employment of support staff in Queensland state schools is determined by school enrolment numbers and as a result the working hours of staff other than teachers in a small school is usually part time. When they are at work administrative assistants tend to provide a buffer for the teaching principal, handling telephone calls, checking incoming mail, preparing accounts for payment, receiving community requests, budgeting preparation, and caring for ill children.

Similarly a positive relationship between teacher aide and teaching principal is vital. In a small one-teacher school the teacher aide fills a quasi-teaching role and is an essential component in the teaching principal's classroom instruction and management. In many small schools the teacher aide fills a number of duties other than in the classroom. He/she is frequently the administrative assistant for a number of hours each week, or the grounds person or cleaner in non-classroom times.

The principal's relationship with the community is equally vital. As a result of their study into small school communities Johns et al. (2001) reported that school leadership was an important determinant of school cohesiveness and played a central role in establishing the partnership between school and community.

More than ever before communities are prepared to voice their opinions of schools and their expectations of them. Parent groups have become more active in voicing their perceived needs for their children's education, as demonstrated in a paper released by the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (2003). It recommended a support and mentoring system for teaching principals and a reduction in their administrative workload and responsibilities in conjunction with an increase in work hours for the administration assistant. However, one of the most powerful recommendations in the paper was that teaching principals have at least three years teaching experience prior to appointment and that the selection criteria for principals in rural and remote areas include communication and leadership skills.

Rural and remote living

Provision of staff, particularly teaching staff, in rural and remote schools in Australia has historically been an issue for education authorities. In an Australian study Jarzabkowski (2003) drew the conclusion that mature and experienced staff with positive attitudes to teaching and their living conditions were important factors in remaining in the area and providing a successful school environment. She added that relationship building was the key to retaining staff in rural and remote schools.

In an investigation into teaching staff in rural and remote areas of Western Australia, Sharplin (2002) reported that many of the participating teachers in the study had previously only lived in urban areas or within easy access to coastal fringes. For the most part these were young teachers, removed from their familiar social networks. Their anxieties, more often than not, were grounded in fears of social isolation and needing to 'fit into' an unknown community.

The issue of social isolation and the perception of 'living in a fishbowl' have been documented previously by Gibson (1994), Lunn (1997), and Yarrow et al. (1999), all of whom identified these issues as leading to the apparent dissatisfaction of teaching in rural and remote areas. In all likelihood the novice female teaching principal has similar concerns, compounded by her own and others' expectations of her gender, her leadership and her administrative abilities.

This study set out to investigate which characteristics and skills make for a successful

beginning female teaching principal in her first year in the role of principal assessed by both small school stakeholders and beginning female teaching principals.

Method

Data collection

The present study employed grounded theory technique of open coding in order to identify patterns of behaviour which could be used to better understand the leadership challenges and expectations faced by female small school teaching principals. The use of interviews permitted individuals to express their interpretation of day-to-day, lived experiences and to allow a better understanding of what it is like for each person living that particular event.

Each interview was analysed through an open coding method with a view to identifying key themes. Open coding of the data permitted the identification of repeating patterns of behaviour which contribute to a greater understanding of social interactions (Hutchinson, 1988). The data analysis of each interview was performed manually, allowing compilation of data which may have been overlooked by a computer data analysis.

This study did not seek to explain the challenges and expectations presented, but rather to understand them and to highlight the need for future beginning female teaching principals to be aware that communities may have expectations beyond those they hold for themselves. Its aim was not to verify a predetermined idea but to gain new insights and to better understand the issues confronting beginning female teaching principals.

Participants

Teaching principals
The small school female teaching principals who participated in this research were identified through the records of the Queensland state government education authority, Education Queensland, as being new appointees to the role of school principal. The identified principals were contacted personally by the primary researcher who sought their participation in the study. Twelve females about to commence their first year in the role of teaching principal agreed to be involved in this research.

All teaching principal participants were interviewed by telephone during the summer vacation prior to commencing in their new role. The interviews were semi structured and their comments were keyed into a computer as they spoke. This open ended approach encouraged participants to reflect on their expectations and perceived challenges and discuss them from their own perspective, with minimal input from the researcher. Probing questions were used only to clarify comments or ideas. A transcript of the interview was e-mailed to each participant for verification within 24 hours of the interview.

Demographic data indicated that 42% of the 12 teaching principals were between the ages of 20 and 30 years, 33% between the ages of 50 and 60 years and the remaining 25% aged between 30 and 50. Thirty-three percent had between one and five years teaching experience, while 17%

had taught more than 20 years. The remainder had taught between 6 and 20 years. Of the 12 teaching principals 33% had not previously taught in a multi age class, or had prior experience working or living in a small community. See Table 1 for demographic details of teaching principals in this study.

TABLE 1: TEACHING PRINCIPALS DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Age	Teaching experience	Previous multi age teaching	Previous small community experience
20 – 30 years	1 – 5 years	Yes	Yes
(42%)	(33%)	(67%)	(67%)
31- 40 years	6 – 10 years	No	No
(17%)	(25%)	(33%)	(33%)
41-50 years	11 – 20 years		
(8%)	(25%)		
51 – 60 years	>20 years		
(33%)	(17%)		

Stakeholders

Seventeen stakeholders agreed to participate and were interviewed during the first term of the teaching principal's appointment. As with the teaching principals the interviews were conducted by telephone, with comments keyed directly into a computer and copies e-mailed, or posted, to the participants.

Of the 17 stakeholders 18% were in the 20 to 30 year age group and a further 18% in the 50 to 60 year age group. A little more than half were in the 41-50 years group. Teachers accounted for 40% of the stakeholders interviewed while the remainder were administrative assistants (24%), teacher aides (18%), P&C (12%) and district office personnel (6%). Of the 17 stakeholders only two were male. Stakeholders had been associated with the community in which they currently lived for between 1 year and more than 30 years. Table 2 provides information regarding the stakeholders in this study.

TABLE 2: STAKEHOLDERS DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Age	*Stakeholder Role*	*Years associated with community*	*Education levels*
20 – 30 years	Teacher	< 1 year	Year 10
(18%)	*(40%)*	*(18%)*	*(24%)*
31 – 40 years	Admin Assistant	1 – 10 years	Year 12
(12%)	*(24%)*	*(12%)*	*(18%)*
41 – 50 years	Teacher Aide	10 – 20 years	Degree/Diploma
(52%)	*(18%)*	*(35%)*	*(46%)*
51 – 60 years	P&C Representative	20 – 30 years	Post graduate
(18%)	*(12%)*	*(35%)*	*(12%)*
	District Office		
	(6%)		

Schools

Small schools were identified as those classified as Band 5 or Band 6 schools in Queensland. Band 5 schools officially cater for up to 80 students, but in most years have an average of about 30 students. Many Band 5 schools typically have fewer than 26 students, the number at which an additional teacher may be appointed. Therefore many of the teaching principals in Band 5 schools are the only teachers in the school, teaching from prep year to Year 7. Band 6 schools officially cater for around 200 students, but most tend to have an average enrolment of a little over 100.

Of the 12 schools involved in this study nine were classified as Band 5. Student enrolment numbers for the Band 5 schools ranged from 12 to 68; for Band 6 schools from 55 to 86 students. Four of the schools were not situated in towns, but were in areas where the school was the only building and students were bused or driven in each day from surrounding properties. The remaining eight schools were in towns with populations of between 70 and 500 and could be as much as 200 kms to the nearest business district.

In order to protect the privacy of the participants in this study all teaching principals, stakeholders and schools have been given fictitious names and small details may have been changed to avoid identifying the source.

Interview Responses

Stakeholders' expectations

During the course of the initial interview stakeholders were asked to identify the skills required to be a successful teaching principal. Those skills were later categorised under seven broad headings:

- Communication skills
- Administrative knowledge
- Time management and organisational skills
- Positive personal characteristics
- Sound teaching ability
- Leadership
- Ability to develop and maintain community relationships.

All 17 stakeholders commented on the need for a teaching principal to be confident in their relationships with the community, to have positive personal characteristics, to be a good communicator and to teach well. The expectations for a successful teaching principal were similar between the individual stakeholders, but each cohort of stakeholders referred to skills which held particular meaning for their own role within the school.

Administrative assistants

The need for the teaching principal to adapt to the administrative role within the school was raised by all four of the administrative assistants. They expressed the need for the teaching principal to come into the role with the minimum requirement of being familiar with departmental systemic requirements such as the AOP (Annual Operational Plan), the budget and financial reports, corporate data downloads, and SIMS (School Information Management System).

Administrative assistants also mentioned the high levels of accountability in relation to financial matters. While they acknowledged their own expertise in financial reporting was vital, they recognised that the teaching principal carried the ultimate responsibility if an error occurred. In some small schools administration staff is constant, but in others it changes regularly due to a husband or partner's work demands. A beginning teaching principal may arrive at her new school to find an inexperienced administrative assistant with no knowledge of the departmental requirements or system. Because small schools in remote areas are often hundreds of kilometres apart, it is difficult to arrange training or assistance from other small schools. Hence the administrative staff identified the expectation that teaching principals be well versed in financial reporting and budgeting prior to arriving at the school.

Mary, an administrative assistant who had been employed at the school for more than 10 years had worked with seven principals. Of those seven she could recall only one who had been principal at another school and therefore had some financial and reporting knowledge. Mary commented about one of the other non-experienced principals:

> The most difficult one I ever worked with was… She was to the point of not knowing a debit from a credit. She would get a catalogue from … and select things and be surprised when the bill came and then send it all back.

Given the close working relationship most administrative staff have with the teaching principal, they were the only stakeholders to comment on the excessive demands of other stakeholders. As an example it was noted that involving students in social and networking activities with students in other schools involved teleconferences and meetings to organise the event, followed by financial and logistical arrangements. In addition, on the day of the event the teaching principal was expected to be involved in all aspects of the day. For a sporting event it may include line marking the sports field, arranging a guest dignitary to present trophies, time keeping events, comforting an upset student, being vigilant with student behaviour, tidying the area, and often driving a bus load of students back to their base school at the conclusion of the day's event.

Teacher aides
Teacher aides commented on the need for the teaching principal to communicate with a broad cross section of the community, to have personal qualities such as flexibility and assertiveness, to be a good role model and to be involved in social activities in town. Linda stated:

> They need to be a good role model for everyone. Kids pick up on a lot of that stuff and
> so do the community members. They need to have a good balance of where and when to
> do things.

While teacher aides expected the teaching principal to complete the necessary administrative tasks, they were more attuned to the way in which she operated in the classroom, or how she communicated what occurred in the classroom. Gemma remarked that she expected the teaching principal to treat the students in a 'motherly' way. She added:

> If the teacher treats the children nicely they go home happy and that makes the parents
> happy. There is the educational side to it, but I like them to be happy.

Teachers
Teachers emphasised their expectation that the teaching principal be accomplished in classroom management and pedagogy and have the ability to teach across all year levels. They acknowledged that the range of duties expected of a teaching principal in an isolated area was not confined to classroom teaching but was married to managing staff, administrative duties, school maintenance and dealing with isolation. From their perspective however, the classroom, learning and student behaviour were paramount. Teachers also voiced their expectation that the teaching principal be firm in managing the local community. Pat summarised the general response from teachers:

> ... when you first come you have to make a very definite stand. Do it at the beginning. If
> you try to change mid stream you are asking for trouble.

Another teacher, Lois, recognised the fragile relationship between the principal and the community when she said:

> ...we go through principals, despite good kids and staff. The community has high
> expectations.

From her own perspective Lois envisaged a successful female teaching principal would be decisive, thereby showing she had 'a backbone' and would be open and honest about all aspects of the school's operations. Importantly, she would be interested in and be seen to be interested in students' extracurricular activities as well as being involved in all community activities.

Meanwhile, Trisha, who had taught at the school for more than 10 years, proposed that a successful female teaching principal needed to demonstrate she was the boss without appearing to be bossy. As a basic premise Trisha identified three essential components for success – the community, staff and students. She explained firstly that the culture of the community needed to be understood and a strong partnership between the school and community forged. Secondly, the teaching principal must recognise staff had lives outside the school while at the same time encouraging a team spirit which included not singling out some staff over others for social activities. Thirdly, a successful female teaching principal took the ultimate responsibility for the physical and emotional wellbeing and learning of every student at the school.

Other criteria from teachers included that the successful teaching principal be dedicated, flexible, friendly and well organised. The issue of organisation was raised by several stakeholders, highlighting the unique circumstances of isolated areas. Kay, who had lived and taught in remote areas for many years summed it up by saying:

> ... everything involves preparation, and early preparation. You can't decide on the spur of the moment to do something. It has to be well planned in advance.

Parents/Community members

Expectations of parents and the community were similar to other stakeholders. They expected teaching principals to come equipped with communication skills, the ability to interact with various community members, be physically fit, able to deal with student behavioural problems, provide remedial tuition and deal with the professional and social isolation.

One of the parent stakeholders, Grace, commented that teaching principals by and large were young people expected to demonstrate advanced maturity in order to successfully fulfil the role to everyone's satisfaction. She expressed the sentiment:

> The teachers who come are young but if they don't have the organisation skills, or the skills to cope with the isolation, or the knowledge that they are the leader, there is nobody standing right next to them and they are the headmaster or headmistress, they won't make it.

Another parent, Mitchell, commented on the teaching principal's high level of accountability and the need for ongoing consultation with a diverse range of stakeholders. However, as a member of the P&C for several years he expressed the opinion that not enough research was done by the incoming teaching principal into what the role entailed or what was involved in living and working in a small country town. He anticipated they would have better knowledge of the area and its values prior to applying for or being appointed to the position. This fact notwithstanding Mitchell expressed the opinion that teaching principals were not adequately remunerated for the work expected of them.

District office

Commenting on the expectations placed on teaching principals in rural and isolated small schools a district office staff member, Jason, stated: "They need to be miracle workers". Based on a 20-year knowledge of the school community and working with several previous principals in the school Jason justified his statement by citing some of the general expectations of successful teaching principals. From an organisational perspective Jason suggested these expectations

included building and maintaining relationships with the community, managing conflict situations and being a good communicator while simultaneously remaining calm, resilient, patient and not taking everything personally. At the same time they were expected to meet organisational demands, be accountable and do it all while focusing on teaching as the highest priority.

Although not one of the stakeholders explicitly referred to the gender of the incoming teaching principal, in at least one school district a petition had been sent to the Minister for Education requesting a male teaching principal be appointed. A lengthy consultation explaining the appointment procedure ensued between the Minister's office, the education district office and the community. The female teaching principal who had been successful in applying for the position was aware of the drama her appointment had evoked and commenced her role with a degree of apprehension. At least two other female teaching principals were subjected to overt comments regarding their gender and the community's preference for a male teaching principal.

Teaching principals' expectations

At the interview prior to commencing as teaching principal each participant was encouraged to express what she believed the community and staff expected from her as well as the expectations they held for themselves. Responses were varied and in some cases situation specific. They all rated community relationships and the ability to communicate effectively as key components of their role. Only three of the 12 teaching principals explicitly mentioned that stakeholders would expect them to exhibit a level of leadership although they all discussed leadership at some time during the interview.

The skills they considered essential to being a successful teaching principal were categorised under seven headings:

- Communication skills
- Leadership skills in the school and broader community
- Ability to build community relationships
- Classroom learning, student behaviour and curriculum
- Managing staffing issues, P&C, and parents
- Meeting systemic administrative requirements
- Balancing work and personal lives

These skills are discussed in more detail below.

(1) Communication skills

All 12 participants expressed their awareness of the need to be an effective communicator within the school and broader community. Being an effective communicator was defined in many ways, including being an active listener, 'not just a talker'; producing an informative newsletter; placing appreciation notes in staff members' pigeon holes; observing body language interactions; greeting parents when they delivered or collected students; and having student parades or assemblies with parents invited to hear good news stories.

Two of the participants, Jill and Alice, rated communication as one of the most important activities they would concentrate on during the year. Jill listed communication along with

changing school routines as activities on which she intended focusing. Jill was in the over 50 age group, married and had taught for almost 30 years. She had taught in multi age classes and had experience in small school communities. In contrast, Alice was single, in her twenties and one of the younger teaching principals in this study. She was new to the role of principal and without country living or multi age teaching experience, but rated communication via a regular newsletter as essential to the role, along with an emphasis on curriculum.

There was general agreement among the teaching principals that producing a regular and relevant newsletter for parents and the community was one of the most effective means of communication. There was also a widely held belief that other school staff would find a newsletter informative, given that in small schools support staff often did not all work on the same days and therefore may otherwise miss school or department based information.

While the teaching principals were able to catalogue a variety of concerns they had about taking on a new and challenging role, none expressed any degree of apprehension regarding her ability to communicate.

(2) Leadership skills in the school and broader community

One of the participants who specifically mentioned the need for a teaching principal to have leadership skills was Nina. She was in her late twenties, single and a mature age graduate who had been teaching three years when she was offered the opportunity to act in the role of teaching principal until a permanent principal could be appointed. She had not previously lived or worked in a small rural community and had no multi age teaching experience. Nina was aware that staff and the community expected her to be a strong leader but expressed concern about her leadership ability. She was conscious of the community's high level of input into the school and was unsure if she could channel their involvement. Nina admitted to not being aware of what the staff expected of her but based on the history of the previous principal she suspected they wanted a confident principal who could stand up to community members and not give in to their demands.

One of the other teaching principals to comment on leadership was Jill. She stated:

> Others will expect me to have backbone and stand and lead. They want the principal to lead, not kowtow to the P&C.

Jill's expectations were not so much self directed but centred on the staff and community. She expected staff to give their best and for the community to understand the effect their decisions had on students. Jill stated she had no concerns about being a leader, apart from her being a workaholic and putting in too much time and effort.

The third teaching principal to specifically comment on the need for solid leadership was Daphne. Daphne was in the over fifties age group, married, and although she had commenced teaching as a mature age student had been teaching almost 20 years at the time of this research. Daphne had taught multi age classes previously but had not worked or lived in a small school community and had no previous experience as a principal. She believed the community as a whole expected her to be a leader but most of all they expected her to teach, to care for the students and to ensure they were happy. Daphne's expectations of herself centred on her teaching ability - she perceived herself firstly as a teacher and secondly as a principal.

(3) Ability to build community relationships

Some of the participants expressed apprehension that in a small community they would be expected to socialise with parents of students and were uncertain what would happen if they declined invitations.

For instance, Ann, married and in her forties, was concerned that the previous principal had been a 'party animal' and the same may be expected of her. She was not inclined toward parties and believed she should only involve herself in activities that appealed to her. Meanwhile Daphne and Nan voiced their concerns about mixing with just one group of parents lest it antagonise others outside that group. Nan was a single woman in her thirties who had lived in a small school community previously, but had not done so as a school principal. Alice's concern was about who she should invite to her house, which invitations she should accept, and how her behaviour would be viewed:

> Things I do in my private life, for example, getting drunk, although I don't do that much, that stands out.

They all agreed however that they expected to be involved in all activities connected to the school and would make an effort to attend most community functions.

The overwhelming perception of the teaching principal participants was that the community's primary expectation would not be on them personally but on the children, wanting them to learn and experience positive outcomes. It was summed up by Janice who had taught for over 20 years and had experience in another small school community:

> At the last school expectations were high. I go in now and will be very wary. I hope their expectations will be that we will offer the best quality education and their children will achieve the outcomes. I will go to the P&C and say this is how things are happening. I'll ask them for their expectations but I want them to be realistic.

(4) Classroom learning, student behaviour and curriculum

All 12 participants commented that teaching was their primary focus. Some wished to change the maths program, others wanted to refocus the literacy program back onto the basic skills, while others wished to address the whole curriculum and its implications.

Four participants had not previously taught in a multi age (Years 1 – 7) class and were concerned students not be disadvantaged as a result. As one participant stated, her expectation was that students be 'number one' not only with her, but with the whole school staff. Overall there was an optimistic expectation that they would create a positive and welcoming environment so that students would enjoy being at school and enjoy the learning experience.

Several of the teaching principals expressed concern regarding Education Queensland's introduction of prep year the following year. Lack of space was compounded in one teacher schools by the need for prep year students to interact in a play based curriculum, while at the same time being as unobtrusive as possible in order for the older students to concentrate. Attached to this issue was the concern of those participants who had not previously taught the lower school grades and were hesitant teaching the early childhood curriculum. Participants expressed the belief that above all other expectations they would be expected to teach well and any shortcomings would be compensated by their professionalism as a teacher.

(5) Managing staffing issues, P&C and parents

As these principals were commencing their first year in the role of leader and manager of the school they had not previously been exposed to managing staff, P&C or parents beyond the classroom requirements. Apprehension was particularly obvious when discussing the P&C. In small schools P&Cs take a lead role in the community and in fund raising for the school. Members are therefore valued and essential to the school; however they are also parents of children in a small community, where privacy is sometimes difficult to maintain and factions may develop.

Principals were aware of the need to build relationships with parents while at the same time remaining neutral in family and community disputes. They were sensitive to the fact they may inadvertently be drawn into conflict and be seen to be 'taking sides'. Ann observed:

> You need delicacy dealing with staff and community – diplomacy. You need to treat people fairly and be nonjudgemental, accepting whoever walks in as being important to the community. Using skills honed as a classroom teacher, dealing with parents, particularly angry parents. People skills. Keep them happy but show you are in control without being a mini Hitler.

Concerned she had no previous experience managing staff or the community Nina sought advice from the Executive Director (Schools):

> It's a very small tight knit community and everyone knows everyone else and they see me as a person coming in for a short space of time. From their perspective they don't want someone coming in telling them what to do and how to do it. Speaking to the EDS yesterday and he said not everyone will be happy all the time.

The issue for Nan was not to be seen as a dictator and for support staff, who typically did not have formal tertiary qualifications, to have 'a sense of importance'. She concluded by observing her desire was to make everyone happy but conceded that realistically that was unlikely to happen.

(6) Meeting systemic administrative requirements

Concern about adapting to the administrative role within the school was expressed by most of the participants. In particular, the less experienced participants indicated a need to learn more about Education Queensland's systemic reporting requirements and about managing human resources. While there was an awareness of systemic reports such as the AOP, finance accountability and the budget, those who had not previously acted as a teaching principal were uncertain of the process involved in writing the reports or meeting the demands. As classroom teachers they had not been exposed to systemic reporting or, in some cases, exposure to corporate data. At least one of the participants stated she needed to learn the acronyms the department used before she could even begin to be effective. There was general agreement regarding the number of e-mails they would receive and concern that not responding quickly enough could jeopardise their careers with district office.

Each participant was keen to demonstrate her potential effectiveness, although each expressed the need in a different way. Jill stated she wanted to 'put my stamp on the school'; while Sally and Ann expressed a need for organised work space and office efficiency. They intended spending time setting up the office area to suit their own organisational needs, thereby making each more effective in her role; whereas Iris was keen to change routines and schedules within the school to accommodate perceived short falls, which would subsequently make her role easier to manage.

(7) Balancing work and personal lives

All 12 teaching principals were aware they needed balance between their work and personal lives. They acknowledged varying manifestations of stress, such as changes in sleeping patterns and eating habits; tiredness; being irritable in daily interactions; and speaking too quickly. Physical signs included shoulder and back pain, psoriasis, cold sores and headaches.

They recognised the need to decrease their levels of stress and to bring balance into their lives and were able to list strategies which would assist in reducing stress levels. Strategies included contacting friends and family by e-mail or telephone; involvement in church and youth groups; taking camping weekends or going home to family; craft activities; yoga; and sport and exercise including walking, jogging, touch football and punching a boxing bag. Those in more isolated areas commented that team sports would be difficult given the lack of community members and facilities.

Discussion

Results from this research suggested common elements existed between the expectations stakeholders held for the teaching principal and those the teaching principal held for themselves. Communication skills, teaching ability, building community relationships, leadership and managing systemic administrative duties were mentioned by both groups of participants and perceived to be essential ingredients for success.

The two components both teaching principals and stakeholders referred to most frequently were communication and teaching ability. The value of good communication skills cannot be overemphasised. A significant number of researchers have highlighted the importance of communication for leaders in all industries (Bennis & Goldsmith, 2003; Bulach, Boothe & Pickett, 1997; Davis, 1997; Dubrin & Dalglish, 2003; Dunphy & Pitsis, 2003; Eales-White, 2003; Mai & Akerson, 2003; Taylor, 2002) and for school principals in small rural schools in particular (Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk & Prescott, 2002). In this current study teaching principals emphasised the need for communication via a school newsletter, while stakeholders implied a need for verbal interaction.

As to teaching ability stakeholders commented on the necessity for the teaching principal to be an effective teacher across all year levels and with all students. During the interviews stakeholders regularly referred to 'the teacher', rather than 'the principal', indicating their priority for the role. Overall the teaching principals indicated a level of confidence with their teaching, despite some hesitation from those not previously exposed to multi age teaching or early childhood curriculum. Rather, their attention was directed to perceived short comings in the school curriculum and the discussion of plans for setting up their classrooms. It was apparent the classroom and curriculum were safe avenues in an otherwise uncertain future.

One element not consistent across the two sets of participants was that of social interaction. Stakeholders appeared to have a social vision of the relationship, making references to the teaching principal helping at fundraising activities, playing sport, socialising at the local 'pub', and taking an interest in and being part of the community. Teaching principals however expressed some concerns about the degree of social involvement expected of them and their wish to retain

some separation from social mingling, although they expressed a willingness to be involved in school related activities. However, as Wildy (2004) reported in her investigation into teaching principals in Western Australia, not being part of the community led to negative perceptions and poor relationships. One parent in this study commented that people coming into a small community needed to accept that the community was not only their work life but also their social life. As Fullan (2000) wrote:

> ...schools need the outside to get the job done. .. The work of the school is to figure out
> how to make its relationship with them a productive one (p. 582).

Another element raised by stakeholders, but not by teaching principals, was that of time management and organisation. This issue referred to the isolation of the communities and the need to plan in advance. Not having been in school leadership roles previously the teaching principals were not aware of the difficulties isolation may create.

Finally, the teaching principals raised an issue not mentioned by stakeholders – that of ensuring a balance between work and personal lives. Stakeholders may not have perceived the importance of having such a balance, or assumed this need would be subsumed in local community event involvement.

This current study supported earlier research by Duignan et al. (1985), Davis et al. (2005) and Gurr et al. (2005) with respect to expectations around communication and leadership placed on all principals, regardless of gender, school location and school size. In addition it supported reports by Sungaila (1982) who claimed female principals were subjected to more stereotypic expectations than males. For instance, teacher aide, Gemma, remarked that she wanted the teaching principal to treat the students in a 'motherly way'. It also supported research by McMurtrie (1997) who claimed it was more difficult for female principals to be successful in small communities, citing one female principal as saying the community preferred a 'big brawny male' as females were perceived incapable of disciplining students.

Conclusion and Implications of Research

This paper forms part of a larger study of female teaching principals commencing their principalship in small rural and isolated communities in Queensland, Australia. Recent history has suggested it has become increasingly difficult to fill principal vacancies in small schools where the principal is frequently the only trained teacher on staff.

One of the most significant findings of this research was the value all participants placed on communication, despite there being multiple interpretations of communication. Given its value it is worth noting that few principals are trained in communicating beyond the classroom instructional level. This is even more relevant when, as has been previously noted, many teaching principals are still relatively young with limited life experiences. They cannot be expected to possess the communication skills necessary for the role without some form of training or preparation.

One of the conclusions drawn from this research is that employing bodies seek to formalise training in communication, in both its written and verbal form for aspiring and appointed leaders. In concert with this recommendation is that communication training also be provided to

community members, or at the very least to P&C members.

The second significant factor to emerge from this study was the value stakeholders and teaching principals placed on teaching and curriculum. Accordingly, attention is drawn to the additional duties expected of a teaching principal and the necessity of educational instruction across all grade levels. Two recommendations are drawn from this finding. Firstly, that the administrative workload of the teaching principal be reduced in order to allow more time to be devoted to teaching and classroom preparation; and secondly that teaching principals not be drawn from a pool of inexperienced teaching graduates. A program of mentoring teachers into rural and isolated areas would provide experience in living in those areas while at the same time providing the development of teaching strategies, multi-age teaching experience and a broader understanding of systemic documents and processes.

Finally, it is recommended that consideration be given to providing education in some communities regarding the contribution female teaching principals can make to it and to its children. In some communities males continue to be perceived as authority figures and as leaders while females are perceived as emotional and nurturing and therefore not suited to leadership. An educational program aimed at informing and demonstrating to the community that females are as capable as males of being school principals, could go some way in alleviating the gender bias currently experienced in some Australian rural and remote communities.

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