

# The Factors Influencing the Career Aspirations of Women Senior Leaders in Secondary Schools

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research was to investigate the main factors that influence the career aspirations of women senior leaders in New Zealand secondary schools. There is currently a significant disconnect between the number of women in secondary teaching and the number who become principals. Despite women dominating the teaching profession, men dominate educational leadership. There are both external structural factors that influence women's career aspirations and personal agency. The research consists of semi-structured interviews with three women senior leaders in Auckland, where they explain their career aspirations and the enabling factors and barriers to achieving them. The most influential factors enabling women were mentoring, experience and flexible workplaces. The major barriers were the pressure to either put career or family first, and the negative perceptions around the role of a secondary school principal. To close the gender gap in educational leadership, women need to be mentored and encouraged into leadership early on in their careers.

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## **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: 

Date: 28/03/2018

## **Ethics Approval**

This research was approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2017, AUTECH Reference number 17/253. For a copy of this approval please see appendix A.

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A dissertation sends you through a range of emotions and even though in the end the work has your name on it, people around you play no small part.

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## **Chapter One – Introduction**

The decision to undertake this research initially came about through both my personal aspiration to become a secondary school principal and my interest in how women in senior leadership and principalship feel about their roles. I have aspired to principalship since early in my teaching career and I have often been conscious of the barriers that I may face in achieving my aspiration, along with the skills and experience that I will need to get me there.

When faced with choosing a dissertation topic I first wanted to look at barriers facing women, however, it quickly evolved into a study of the factors that influence women's career aspirations, and so the emphasis turned to women themselves and how they made their career decisions. I further narrowed the research to consult women who are currently senior leaders but may not necessarily aspire to principalship. The reason for this change came from an interest in those who had already shown senior leadership skills and experience, as that is the logical next stage in my career as a middle leader. During this chapter I explain the aim of my research and the questions I tried to answer. I highlight the rationale for my research with emphasis on how my readings highlighted a gap in the research into women senior leaders' career aspirations in New Zealand. I then describe the context of where my research took place and the significance of completing my research. Finally, I will outline the further chapters of the dissertation, explaining how I have organised my research.

## **Research Aim**

This dissertation analyses the career aspirations of three women in senior leadership positions. It investigates the factors that have influenced each leader's career aspirations to date and what may influence their future aspirations. Secondly, it questions when the leaders made their career plans, whether these have been intentional paths or have woven and developed over time. Finally, it seeks to discover whether any of those leaders interviewed have experienced enabling factors which have helped them in their aspirations, or barriers that have may have prevented them from achieving their goals or may prevent them from achieving them in the future.

The proposed research questions are:

- Why do women choose or not choose to become principals?
- When do women make their choice to achieve principalship?
- What are the enablers to achieving principalship?
- What are the barriers to achieving principalship?

These four focusing questions were used to frame interview questions with the participants.



## **Rationale**

Having experienced what, I perceived as gender bias in the workplace when applying to take on more leadership responsibility in co-educational schools, the factors that influence women's aspirations in the area of educational leadership are of interest. I have experienced a gender bias both working in England (where I trained to become a teacher) and in New Zealand, where I have resided for five years. I understand that not all women aspire to the role of principal, therefore the rationale was to find out the factors that do influence the career aspirations of women senior leaders. In professional conversations with colleagues who do not wish to progress higher in leadership, the usual reasons include family commitments, a lack of self-belief, previous discrimination or a negative view of the role of a principal.

The purpose of my dissertation was to investigate how both external factors and a teacher's agency, which Smith (2011) describes as women who have self-defined their career and made their own choices as opposed to being influenced by societal expectations of putting family above career, discrimination, and direct experience and perceptions of what a principal role includes. It may be a complex combination of all the above-mentioned factors for some leaders and other emergent factors that have not yet been considered. Smith (2011) found in her study that female interviewees based their career decisions on "their values, their sense of social justice and the influence they could exert" (p.18). Those who viewed principalship in a negative way felt that it was a lonely role, which did not have a direct and wide-ranging impact on student outcomes. Smith (2011) found that those who were principals took the opposite stance. Smith's (2015) study suggests that women just

feel unable to devote the time to the role that they perceive is needed. This is supported by Coleman (2007) who argues that women do not necessarily aspire to principalship because “leadership is unconsciously associated with men” (p.148).

### **Definitions**

A Senior Leader is a teacher in the position of deputy principal (DP) or associate principal (AP).

A large co-educational secondary school is a secondary school with over 1000 boys and girls on the roll.

Agency is the personal views and decisions made by individuals.

### **Context of Study**

The study takes place in Auckland, New Zealand. The participants of the research all work at large co-educational secondary schools within the Auckland super city, including the regions of Manukau City, Auckland City, Waitakere and North Shore City. The participants chosen were from a range of deciles, as New Zealand schools are allocated a decile based on the socio-economic background of the cohort. The ethnic makeup of these schools tends to differ also. Lower decile schools tend to have a higher percentage of Māori and Pasifika students compared to European and Asian in the Auckland region. Higher deciles are the opposite. The decile system can act as de facto racial segregation. Having worked in decile ten and decile three schools myself, I am aware of the differing challenges leaders face.

## **Significance of the Research**

This research is significant for two main reasons. The first is that it forms the final assessment of my Master of Educational Leadership degree. It gives me a wider understanding of what motivates other women, and an opportunity to better understand my own career aspirations. I currently aspire to become a principal, but as I move further in my career it is important for me to have a very clear understanding of whether this is, firstly, the right choice for me and, secondly, how other women have succeeded in senior leadership. For the participants, this research provides an opportunity to reflect on their careers so far and to have a confidential and honest conversation about the enablers and barriers they have faced previously and may encounter in the future. They will receive a copy of the findings, which will give them an understanding of the wider context of how other women DP's are making decisions about their careers. The wider significance of this research is to draw some independent conclusions about a current issue of interest in educational leadership. This research is taking place at a time when, according to Ministry of Education figures, while 60% of secondary school teachers are women, only 31% of secondary school principals are women (New Zealand Government, 2017). This gender gap, in the top position one can achieve in a school, raises questions as to why this is the case, particularly when all genders are required to be equally qualified. There is currently minimal research in this area in a New Zealand context. This research seeks to add to the debate around why many women opt out of principalship and provides information on the specific Auckland context. Internationally, there are several studies on women principals and teachers, but less research has been done with senior leaders, specific to career aspirations. Fuller

(2009), Smith (2015) and McKillop and Moorosi (2017) suggest that empowering women from an early stage in their careers would have a significant impact on closing the gap between male and female numbers in principal positions in a range of countries.

### **Dissertation Structure**

Chapter One explains the rationale, aim and background to my research. Chapter Two outlines the recent literature around the career aspirations of women in educational leadership, as well as the factors that influence the career progression of women. It emphasises the debate between structural and agentic factors. Chapter Three features my chosen research design, methodology, and methods. It also explains how the research was carried out. Chapter Four focuses on the findings of the research through analysing the data collected from the participants. It addresses the findings from the participants as individuals, and synthesises the collected data to find patterns. Chapter Five identifies and evaluates the findings of the research with an emphasis on the implications of this research on me and the wider community. Chapter Six addresses the overall conclusions of the research, and considers the limitations and recommendations for further research.

## **Chapter Two- Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The reason for the gap between men and women in senior leadership positions in all professions has often been referred to as the 'glass ceiling' (Dreher, 2003, p.542; Smith, 2014; Waring, 1992). The glass ceiling metaphor suggests that no matter how hard women work, the structures of institutions and society are stacked against them.

Many Western democracies including the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand (NZ) are experiencing both a teacher and principal shortage largely due to retirements, the cost of living, government politicisation of the education system and an increased workload. Nevertheless, the shortages mean that not only is there a gap between the genders in leadership, but it is likely to get worse before it gets better, largely due to the realities of teacher working conditions as shown in England and Wales (Smith, 2015, p. 817). Teacher working conditions, according to Smith (2015), are difficult, with a lot of hours and a constant struggle to achieve a work/life balance.

Previous authors considered the "feminising of the teaching workforce" (Coleman, 2007, p. 384) as a theme influencing women choosing to be principals, but this has not made a huge impact on the numbers of women in senior leadership. Coleman's (2007) research suggests that while a teaching career may be family friendly, the overriding perception remains that principalship is not.

The first of two main areas of discussion in explaining inequality between men and women in educational leadership is based around whether the notion of a glass ceiling

still exists 30 years after the term was coined. The second area is the agency and personal choices of women in education. Agency means the deliberate decisions people make according to their values and aspirations.

In terms of the first area, available research about female or gender leadership illustrates that the glass ceiling can be referred to as one of the external factors that contributes to the gender gap at senior levels of leadership across the world in education. Many authors (particularly in South Africa, Canada, the UK, Israel and NZ) found that existing structures in both society and individual organisations did not make it easy for women to close this externally imposed inequality gap.

The second area linked to inequality is agency. Smith (2011) and Moreau, Osgood and Halsall (2007) argue that rather than existing structures keeping women out of leadership positions, it is the agency of many women to simply put family or quality of life issues first. Moreau et al. (2007) highlight that for some women, the view is that you can have a career as a leader or have a family, but that it is very difficult to manage both. Some women choose to prioritise having a family and a work/life balance and therefore feel they are unable to devote the time needed to be a senior leader or, as Smith (2015) suggests, they may make the decision not to be a leader as it would take them out of the classroom more.

There are four key themes that will be discussed throughout this literature review: why women aspire to principalship, or opt out; how far their decisions are based on long-term career planning; the enabling factors which assist women to progress up

the career ladder in educational leadership; and, finally, the barriers that women perceive are preventing them from gaining leadership roles either through external factors beyond their control or exercising their agency to put other aspects of life above career progression. Within each theme external factors and agency will be considered, as both areas have an impact on the reasons women opt in to or out of principalship, and the enablers and barriers that influence this decision.

### **Why Women Aspire or Do Not Aspire to Principalship**

When considering the gender gap, there must be understanding of why women may or may not be attracted to the role of principal as a job. The perception of what it takes to be a principal differs amongst women teachers and leaders, and their perception can alter depending on the role they currently fill.

#### **Reasons women aspire to principalship**

The main reasons women aspire to the role of principal are twofold. Firstly, they believe they can make the most difference to student outcomes in that position and, secondly, in modern times the shift in understanding of a principal's role has made it more attractive.

In terms of the first reason, Smith's (2011) study of female teachers' and headteachers' perspectives in the UK found that women in the role of headteacher were of the view that holding the position allowed them to provide the best education possible for students attending their schools. The women in the study who had aspired to principalship saw themselves as being pupil centred. Bush (2008) further argues that

leadership should be underpinned by educational aims. Over time educational aims have shifted away from teacher-centred to student-centred learning, therefore the role of the leader has also shifted, making it more attractive to student-centred practitioners.

The second reason is that women who chose to opt in to principalship believed there was no longer a need for extremely harsh or very soft and feminine attitudes. This is again a shift, as McTavish and Miller (2009) suggest the term 'management' was previously associated with men through the concept of "think manager, think male" (p. 17). They go further and explain that where women have been successful in leadership roles in the past it has been because they have 'assimilated' a more masculine style and this is no longer necessary. Shields (2005) explains, "power used thoughtfully and ethically ... can be a strong force for collaboration, for communication and for positive change with educational organisations" (p. 84). That sense of collaboration and communication is more associated with those who are student centred and may appeal more to women.

The change in terminology from school management to school leadership highlights a 'paradigm shift' in the roles of senior staff in a school (Bush, 2008). As the paradigm around leadership has shifted, it is possible that more women may choose to opt into principalship with a focus on improving student outcomes. A flexible workplace and gender balance in senior leadership teams also provide some explanation of why women may opt into principalship, and these will be discussed further under the enabling factors section.



### **Reasons women do not aspire to principalship**

The literature reveals that there are six key reasons some women decide to opt out of the principalship route. These reasons fall under the areas of perceived external barriers to women's progression and that of personal agency. The external factors are first that due to the glass ceiling (Coleman, 2009), women can be put off applying because they feel they will be unable to progress easily. The second factor is the perceived expectation that women leaders must take on masculine traits (Smith, 2011) despite the paradigm shift explained above. The third is a feeling of being an outsider in a predominantly male environment of leadership, and also having a lack of role models who are women (Coleman, 2003, 2007). The two most influential agentic factors impacting an active decision not to progress are choosing family first, and having a negative perception of what it means to be a principal with a view that leadership is not what education is about and is not pupil centred. The sixth and final factor is that many women dislike the competitive side of leadership.

### ***External factors***

The glass ceiling is a major reason some women opt out. There is a continuing view that due to the 'gatekeepers' (Coleman 2009; Waring, 1992) of our institutions and societies, who are predominantly male, white and middle class, women (and ethnic minorities) face a much tougher time gaining promotion than men. This is particularly true of the makeup of boards of governors in secondary schools in countries like England and Wales. Dreher (2003) states that the 'glass ceiling' creates three problems. The first is that if women perceive their gender as a barrier to promotion,

they will be less likely to apply. Fuller (2009) supports this with evidence that in England and Wales it is less likely for women to be sent on senior leadership courses. Women are unlikely to push for courses if they feel the odds are already against them. The second of Dreher's problems is that a lack of diversity in a management team can lead to poor decision-making. Coleman (2009) and Waring (1992) support Fuller's (2009) argument by explaining that when there is a lack of diversity at the top of a school structure it leads to a homogenous management team who are unable to look beyond their own interests. The third problem explained by Dreher is when the pool of potential leaders is limited by gender barriers. Being blinded by the gender of an employee prevents the organisation from being able to move the right people into the right positions. Fitzgerald (2013) argues that the gender imbalance is an often-denied truth as part of series of myths about women in the workforce. She refers to the issue as a 'myth of opportunity' which is a belief by some that the battle of inequality has already been won (p. 20), when it has not. Fitzgerald's (2013) argument lends further weight to the suggestion that there is still a 'glass ceiling' (Smith, 2014), although Fuller (2009) discovered in the UK that the presence of a 'glass ceiling' was dependent on the area of the country where women applied for promotion. The inconsistent nature of diversity in leadership suggests that some regions are embracing the change in leadership expectations and this has had an impact on the glass ceiling. The regional differences will be discussed in the enabling factors section.

The second factor is that despite the paradigm shift explained, many women still perceive that to be a successful leader they must take on masculine traits. This

supports Gilligan's (1982) claims that women view relationships as a web rather than hierarchical and are impeded by their belief that a hierarchical position would make it difficult to maintain equitable relationships. Thirty years on Smith (2011) continues Gilligan's claim by showing that women in her study who opted out believed that they would need to be a "steel woman...more masculine than male leaders" (p. 531) to succeed. The latter implies that if a woman does not want to take on a masculine model she feels is required, she may choose to opt out of that career pathway.

The third external factor is the feeling of being an outsider in a predominantly male environment of leadership. The feeling contributes to women opting out of principalship because of the loneliness created by the homogeneous structure of many board and senior management teams. Coleman (2007) explains that the homogenous structure makes women feel like "outsiders, as leadership is unconsciously identified with men" (p. 383). The feeling of being an outsider, Blackmore (2013) argues, is "indicative of a wider gender (and educational) inequality" (p. 148). The issue around the homogenous structures in secondary schools raises questions about how girls and women are likely to be successful even if they do aspire to senior leadership. Even when women have progressed to senior leadership, the homogenous structure can still be a reason they decide not to progress further. In Coleman's (2003, 2007) study of male and female headteachers, the women interviewed felt isolated in their role as they "are not generally expected to be in a leadership role" (p. 32). The fear of loneliness and isolation can be enough to deter women from seeking principalship. Some women also perceive that there are higher expectations of them if they wish to

pursue leadership, and that they must be “better than a man in order to become a headteacher” (Coleman, 2003, p. 32).

Furthermore, the issue of loneliness and being an outsider can still exist even when women achieve senior leadership positions. In Diko’s (2014) study of a progressive school in South Africa, while there was a proportional number of female and male leaders, the roles that these leaders had varied in their importance and power within the school. Men were put in charge of curriculum and women in charge of cleaning and the cafeteria, reinforcing stereotypical gender roles. With a system that only offers equality on the surface, it makes sense for women in that situation to question their ability and desire to progress further. The unequal way that schools can distribute leadership highlights the importance of having genuine equality in practice, not just by job title, if women are to stop feeling like outsiders.

### ***Agency***

The three agentic factors that influence women to opt out of principalship are choosing to put family first, having a negative perception of what it means to be a principal, that leadership is not what education is about and is not pupil centred. The third agentic factor and sixth overall factor is that many women dislike the competitive side of leadership.

The decision to put family life above career is, for many women, a conscious life choice. Smith (2011) argues that women are not just “passive dupes” (p. 22) and that they make decisions about their careers rather than sleepwalking through the process. Women can balance family and career if they so wish, but when they decide

not to, this is their choice and not society's. McKillop and Moorosi (2017) also argue that women's decisions to place family first and opt out are often based on their values from childhood. Smith's (2011) view is that educational leadership is a hierarchical system that many women simply choose not to participate in as it does not meet their needs and values as professionals.

The final reason women opt out is the competitive side of leadership. The culture of competition and ambition is described in Smith's (2011) research as a 'very male thing' by a teacher who opted out of leadership. The teacher's opinion suggests that the culture of what she called "manipulation and politicking" (p. 16) is disconcerting. Her opinion supports that of Fitzgerald (2013) who states that the workplace encourages interpersonal competition between women, which underpins what Blackmore (1999) describes as a masculine environment where most women do not thrive. Coleman's (2007) suggestion that some women teachers are deterred from leadership by the traditional view of leadership containing "stereotypically male attributes (like competition) ...these stereotypes are not helpful to women as they define women's leadership as a deficit model" in our institutions (p. 391). If competition is also considered a male attribute, is it unsurprising that this would deter women from wishing to pursue principalship.

### **Career Path Decision Making**

As with all professions some women choose to develop a long-term career plan from the outset. Other women choose to adapt and progress when the time and opportunities are available, which is a more responsive, but also more complex,

approach. The following subsections will analyse the reasons behind these two approaches to career aspirations.

Long-term career planning is usually associated with high levels of agency and self-definition. Smith (2011) and McKillop and Moorosi (2017) argue that those who self-define their careers to a high level are more likely to become principals, unless they have decided to become a principal for politicised reasons as stated by Smith (2011). A politicised reason would be a desire to make a distinct change within a school based on moral values and beliefs. Smith (2011) suggests there could be a link between early, self-defined, career planning and reaching principalship, putting forward the argument that those with leadership potential need to be mentored from the beginning of their careers in education.

McKillop and Moorosi (2017) found that “early experiences of leadership build women’s confidence to lead and propel them into headship much faster” (p. 349). Evidence of self-defined agentic decision making about careers was found in Smith’s (2015) study on new teachers. Smith (2015) found that new teachers often made early decisions about their careers based on their gender. Gender-based decisions can both be considered agentic and external, depending on how conscious women are of why they have made the decision. Smith (2015) also highlights how much aspirations change at the end of the initial teacher training, once the reality of a being a teacher sinks in. Smith (2011, 2015) and Moorosi and McKillop (2017) indicate that decisions to opt in or out are therefore made early on for many teachers.

Where some women were making long-term plans to become secondary school principals, they had also shown evidence of long-term life planning. Coleman (2010) found that 67% of participants in her study of women principals in England and Wales were married and approximately half had children, compared to men, whereas over 90% of men were married with children. The ability to rise to the top and have a family is, of course, possible, but the findings suggested that half of women chose career over family, which is a decision that men in the study did not appear to have to make. Moreau et al. (2007) also suggests that even if a woman does have a long-term plan, it often involves breaks for children and does not follow the linear career pathway. The choice of whether to have a family is also a factor in the self-defined career planning women undertake, especially if they do aspire to principalship.

The second approach to career planning is about timing and opportunity. Not all women who aspire to principalship do so from early in their career. Smith's (2011) self-defined agency compared to externally defined career paths is a simplistic view that underestimates the compromises many women make as part of longer-term life goals rather than just career goals. Coleman (2010) explains that many women incrementally adopt strategies to allow them to manage competing aspirations of family and career. Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) support Coleman's (2010) concept that women balance more than their careers, so they do not always aspire to the highest positions until later in their careers when they have more freedom to put in more hours and take on more responsibility at work, because they have less at home. It is therefore possible to both plan one's career and one's family life. Coleman (2010) explains that some use a 'postponement strategy', which is a dual pathway

where they choose to have children while remaining a teacher or middle leader and then aspire to senior leadership and principalship once their children are older or at least at school. Other women use a 'modification strategy', where they instead choose to support their partner's career aspiration in place of their own for the good of the family. The final possibility is that of a 'balancing strategy' where the couple choose to support one another and share the load of family and career aspirations equally. The final strategy of balance was more common for those principals who were under 50 years old, possibly indicating a cultural shift in relationships between partnered professionals. Overall, where women aspire to principalship, they must balance those ambitions with other life decisions. Evidence suggests that most women do not choose to solely focus on career aspirations, as it is very difficult to do so without sacrificing other life goals such as having a family.

### **Enabling Factors to Achieve Principalship**

There are several enabling factors which assist women with their desired career progression to principalship. The first explained in this section is mentoring and support, as research shows that where junior teachers have women role models and mentors they are more likely to aspire to principalship. The second is linked to how workplace flexibility can provide women with sufficient opportunities so they do not have to choose between a family and their career.

#### **Mentoring and support**

To encourage more women to aspire to principalship, there needs to be a shift in the way leaders are developed. In certain areas, there has been progress. An example is



in Birmingham, England, where Fuller (2009) explains that in the areas with a closing gender gap, there is now a healthy pool of female leadership role models, which provides a solution to the issue of a lack of role models. The women in leadership in Birmingham provide role models for emergent leaders to continue this trend. The National College is a further attempt at closing the gap as it provides opportunities for all teachers to go through practice-based courses to improve their chances of promotion. The National College for Leadership was originally set up in 2000 to help train teachers to become school leaders. It specialised in middle and aspiring senior leadership courses and until 2013 was an independent body. With courses done online and in school hours, it provided an alternative to academic study by offering a more practice-based, flexible approach to career development. Course fees were paid by the school which assisted teachers who aspired to leadership. This benefitted women who may have postponed promotion previously, by providing a more flexible, alternative pathway.

### **Flexibility of the workplace**

McTavish and Miller (2009) explain that the UK Labour government of 1997-2010 began to implement changes in the flexibility of working hours and flexible programmes that allowed teachers to train for leadership through the National College. Although working hours were made more family friendly, women still opted for middle leadership roles that kept them in the classroom or in pastoral roles. The limited impact of the working hour reforms in the UK shows that even if there is an attempt to make work/life balance child friendly, flexibility in working hours is only one aspect of enabling women to progress.

## **Barriers to Achieving Principalship**

Despite the changes to employment law and societal attitudes towards women in leadership in NZ, there remain several barriers that can either delay the advancement of women leaders' careers or indeed prevent them altogether. These barriers fall under the two areas of external factors and agency.

### **External factors**

This first section on external factors highlights how a lack of mentoring, role models and pathways prevent the gender gap from closing. It also addresses the reality that there are still different societal expectations of men and women who take on leadership roles.

#### ***Lack of mentoring***

Fushell and Tucker (2014) explain that while feeling qualified is an important factor for women who seek leadership roles, in their study women in Canada who undertook post-graduate study did not always seek administrative roles. The reasons they gave were family commitments or a lack of mentoring. They noted a difference in the factors women considered when promotion was possible, compared to a male participant whose "career moves were intentional and focused, with new goals being set as each was achieved" (p. 63).

Lack of mentoring also impacts on the confidence women have in their ability to lead. Thomson (2009) explains that "women advance more slowly because ... (they) are often overlooked as potential leaders" and therefore do not receive mentoring (as

cited in Fushell & Tucker, 2014, p. 69). Both Fuller (2009) and Smith (2015) suggest that empowerment of women teachers from an early stage in their careers would have a long-term impact on closing the gap between male and female numbers in principal positions in a range of Western democracies.

### ***Different societal expectations of men and women in the workplace***

The historical tradition is that of women and men having separate societal roles: men, in the public sphere of work and politics; women, in the private sphere of home and domestic life. Those societal expectations still have an impact even in the 21st century. Despite the rise of feminism, the notion of gender role suitability, whether through societal or personal views, remains. Coleman (2007) also noted that while there has been a rise in shared domestic responsibility between men and women, the trends still show that women were more likely to take the bulk of responsibility regardless of whether they were a principal themselves or the partner of one.

### **Agency**

When considering the barriers to women gaining senior leadership roles in secondary schools, in terms of agency the factors covered in the earlier section on why women opt out of principalship as a career path are relevant. Those factors included choosing family over career, a negative perception of the principal's role and the competitive side of leadership. These factors are covered in depth in the section on why women opt out of principalship as they only become a barrier when women decide to opt in.

## **Conclusion**

The reasons for the gap between the number of men and women in senior leader and principal roles in secondary schools in New Zealand is associated with a multitude of complex factors. In this chapter, content is discussed under two sets of factors linked to the career progression of women to leadership: external factors and agency. The most prevalent reason put forward in the literature is that there remains a plethora of external barriers to women's progression. Even though Smith (2011) argues against external barriers being most influential, her study found that substantial numbers of women teachers are put off leadership very early in their teaching careers. The Birmingham case outlined by Fuller (2009) shows that it is possible to have equality across an area, albeit as an exception to the rule.

While Smith (2011, 2015) acknowledges that the barriers to progression exist, she argues there is not enough valid research into teacher agency to be able to fully understand its role in the chosen career path of women in education. However, the external barriers of being an 'outsider leader' (Coleman, 2007) and experiencing discrimination in a patriarchal society are very strongly put forward by several writers in the literature including Blackmore (1999) and Coleman (2007). Even when equal opportunity rulings require a certain number of women to be on the leadership staff, as Diko's (2014) research reinforced, the numbers do not necessarily remove societal views of masculine and feminine roles in the workplace.

The following chapter will explain how the research design into the factors which influence the career aspirations of women senior leaders in secondary schools was conducted.

## **Chapter Three- Methodology and Research Design**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to explain my approach to the research, and the methods used to collect and analyse data. The first section features my rationale for using a critical lens with a narrative methodology. The second section outlines the use of semi-structured interviews as a method, and highlights why this was the best choice for researching factors that influence the career aspirations of women senior leaders. The third section describes the process of contacting, sampling and collecting data from the three participants. Finally, I explain how the data were analysed and the ethical considerations that I had to make during the research so that it would be ethically valid.

### **Methodology**

A narrative approach within a critical paradigm was utilised for this research. The narrative approach enabled me to critically analyse the factors that influence the career aspirations of women senior leaders in secondary schools in New Zealand. A critical lens was crucial to understand the participants' personal stories, as everyone has their own unique history. I considered using a constructivist lens at first, as I was interested in how, "individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). However, the constructivist lens did not go far enough for me, as I not only wanted to understand but also to enact change. A desire to enact change better fits the transformative or critical paradigm. Critical researchers seek to advocate for the change they want to see, and I am passionate about getting more

women into principalship. Leavy (2017) explains that for research to be critical, it must focus on those who are on the outside of the main group in that aspect of society – in this case, women in educational leadership. Mertens (2010) supports this view by explaining that for research to be transformative, it must look at a marginalised group. Gender inequality research falls under the critical paradigm. In the case of researching senior leadership in secondary schools in New Zealand, women are certainly in the minority and therefore fit the critical research paradigm. Shields (2012) goes further to describe the role of a critical researcher by arguing that in positivist worldview hegemony, critical researchers must not only wish to see change, but must also become advocates for the marginalised group their research represents. In the case of educational research, Shields (2012) states that this is particularly crucial when so many previous attempts to enact change have failed within the sector. Cohen (2011) explains clearly how this can be done when considering inequality in education, not just for female students, but for female staff and their aspirations too. It was important before embarking on the research to consider whose interests were most served by the current system. In the case of educational leadership, the interests most served were those of men. Whilst this research is not being undertaken through a feminist lens, it is important to take note of the role feminist research plays within the critical paradigm, as it seeks to empower women to achieve equality. This dissertation seeks to understand and recommend change in principalship, underpinned by the belief that more women should be in this role.

Leavy (2017) highlights how a critical paradigm supports qualitative research as it allows the researcher to “unpack the meanings people ascribe to ... situations” (p. 9). Leavy (2017) also explains that the use of narrative helps to provide insight into specific women’s understanding of the factors that influence their decisions. Floyd (2012) argues that the use of a narrative inquiry is focused on the personal perspectives of people’s experiences. His study of the career trajectories of leaders is like my aim of studying the aspirations and stories of women and their career goals. The use of narrative can take a more constructivist as opposed to critical stance, as it seeks to understand a person’s life (Bryman, 2012). A narrative approach here not only seeks to understand the lives of the participants, but also sheds light on the factors preventing some women from aspiring to principalship by focusing on the narrative around these issues. Gunter and Ribbins (2003) describe this as a critical humanist paradigm which “is central to the human experience and existence” (Bold, 2012. p. 17). By analysing individuals’ narratives, I was able to gain a greater personal insight than a quantitative study would allow, and a narrative approach enabled the participants to share emergent factors which had not yet been considered. This in turn may more successfully transform opportunities for a better representation of women in school principalship.

### **Positioning**

The goal of this research was to create a narrative of factors that influence career aspirations of women senior leaders in secondary schools. The key epistemological assumption behind this was the belief that there should be equality between the numbers of men and women in educational leadership and their roles. While this was



my assumption, it was not something I revealed to the participants, as Floyd (2012) explains this can create bias. I used a qualitative approach to build a deep picture of each participant, as O’Lewis (1961, as cited in Bryman, 2012) explains that research should give the participants the chance to talk about events and topics that come up in conversation that they may not normally have considered. Floyd (2012) warns that a potential shortcoming to the narrative approach is the resulting generalisations from each personal story. I felt that it was important therefore to make the participants’ voices heard in the first person to avoid that. Overall, it was imperative that my chosen methodology was appropriate for the size of this research as a 60-point dissertation. The overall aim was to gain critical insight into the stories of the three participants, and a narrative approach within a critical paradigm allowed for clearer understanding, as I was motivated to improve the situation for women in education who aspire to leadership, while actively listening to their unique stories.

## **Methods**

Situated within the critical humanist paradigm, qualitative interviewing methods were the appropriate way to gain an in-depth understanding of the different perceptions of the interviewees. While Creswell (2014) explains that a quantitative study with surveys would be quicker to analyse and would aid in making wider generalisations than qualitative interviews, surveys would be too restrictive as the individual’s experience is central to this study, as shown in Diko’s (2014) study in South Africa. In Diko’s research (2014) there were equal numbers of male and female senior leaders, however, women were given domesticated areas of school life to oversee, which may not have been discovered through a survey. Therefore, the

survey method would be unable to address the type of narrative that is necessary to understand an individual's experience.

Each subject has their own unique experiences to share, and the job of the researcher is to gain an insight into their subject's experiences and aspirations, which in turn will answer the research questions. Bryman (2012) describes this as qualitative interviewing, which can be unstructured or semi-structured. Bryman (2012) explains that the advantage of both types of interviews is the ability for the researcher to gain information from the interviewee that they may not have considered. Czarinaawska (2004) highlights the usefulness of interviews to give the researcher a sample of someone's reality and so help them to understand the motivations and, in the case of this research, the factors which influence our decisions. I was concerned, however, that an unstructured interview with a few starting prompts for the interviewer would give the participant 'free rein' to discuss their career experiences, and the nature of this research could take a negative turn if I touched on a delicate area of conversation for the participant, for example, if they had faced discrimination. Semi-structured interviews gave me a chance to personalise the experience for the subjects by probing for more information where necessary. Czarinaawska (2004) also suggests that by using a semi-structured narrative rather than closed interview questions we can better understand something. Therefore, a semi-structured interview allowed me to keep the interview focused, while still allowing the participants to expand on questions where they felt more strongly about the issue at hand or simply had a 'story to tell'.

Kvale (1996) identifies several important criteria for a successful interviewer. Three key areas that stand out and support the proposal of a semi-structured interview are: openness – the need to be flexible where the subject wishes to expand on a topic; steering – to be able to stay on track to find the answers that are being sought; and structuring – if the interviewer is clear about their goals, then the interview will run smoothly. Therefore, in the case of each interview, I was prepared to rephrase my questions where necessary or ask for specific examples where I sensed there was more to learn, as recommended by Kvale (1996).

### **Interview questions**

I went into each interview with the preliminary questions shown below:

- Do you aspire to become a principal? Please explain your reasons for this.
- When did you first decide that you did or did not want to become a principal?  
What were your reasons for this?
- What has helped you in your career so far and/or do you think would help you achieve principalship?
- Have you faced any barriers which have impacted on your career aspirations?

During the interviews, I asked for specific examples where a participant was vague in their answer, or if they hinted at something that I instinctively felt would be useful to know more about as it was a factor or issue I had previously read about or experienced personally. I had a further conversation with them following the interview and in two cases they provided me with additional information that gave

me a better understanding of each participant. For example, I learned more about their current schools and personal lives.

### **Sampling**

There were two stages to my sampling of participants. The initial sampling was emailing potential participants by contacting them at school via their school email address. I contacted 15 schools and 30 potential participants in total. I selected schools that were from a range of deciles (explained below) and across the wider Auckland area. I mostly heard back from higher decile schools and in two cases multiple people from the same school, however I had heard back from eight participants within a few weeks.

The data was collected within Auckland secondary schools that are co-ed and from deciles two, seven and nine. In New Zealand, schools are given a decile rating depending on the socio-economic backgrounds of the students who attend the schools. One is the lowest socio-economic decile and ten is the highest. I chose a range of deciles, as I wanted to understand whether the socio-economic status of the school would highlight any differences between the factors that influenced each participant. The interviews were conducted in English.

The second stage involved how I chose participants who responded to my initial contact. With the paradigm clear, the decision of sampling also needed to be realistic for the time frame I had to complete the interviews. I chose three women senior leaders from large (over 1000 students) co-educational secondary schools in the

Auckland region. I contacted potential participants directly using school websites to find out their contact information and shared the Participant Information Sheet with them (see Appendix B).

Given the tight timeframe of only a few weeks to recruit participants, the purposive sampling process described was appropriate. Wellington (2015) explains purposive sampling in three ways. The most relevant to this study was typical case sampling as I chose participants who met the criteria set out in my proposal. The criteria were that they must be a woman and in a senior leadership role in a large Auckland co-educational secondary school. Purposive sampling was also useful because it allowed me to make judgements on participants who were most likely to be able to answer the proposed research questions in the required depth. This is very important in an in-depth narrative study (Leavy, 2017), because when only three people are being interviewed, they need to fit the criteria and have a story to tell.

### **The Participants**

There were three participants with different experience and backgrounds who all taught at different schools.

- Participant one completed her teaching training in England and was of British Asian descent. She had been a DP for two years at a decile seven school in Auckland City and had been teaching for 18 years in both England and New Zealand. She has two young children. She was passionate about appraisal,

teaching and learning and professional development. In Chapter Four she is referred to as Amina.

- Participant two is New Zealand trained and of New Zealand European descent. She has 16 years' experience in the tertiary sector and has been a DP for one year at a decile nine school in Manukau City. She has teenage children and her husband works from home. She was passionate about teaching and learning. In Chapter Four she is referred to as Laura.
- Participant three is New Zealand trained and of New Zealand European descent. She had experience in the tertiary sector and had been an AP for three years plus a further five years' experience as a DP. She works at a decile two school in Manukau City. She has children who are grown up and was passionate about developing her own vision for school leadership and working with Pasifika and Māori students. In Chapter Four she is referred to as Susan.

### **The Interviews**

I met with each participant for approximately one hour and the recorded interviews ranged between 14 and 20 minutes. I was concerned at how short the interviews were as I expected them to go longer and I worried about how this would impact my findings. Although only part of the meeting was recorded, we further discussed their life histories and views on principalship when I stopped recording. Interview questions were semi-structured with the intention of building up a rapport with each

participant whilst also gaining valuable data for the research (Wellington, 2015). Each interview used open questions to start the conversation followed by supplementary questions to elicit more information. For each interview recording, notes were made alongside recording to assist in guiding supplementary questioning. I chose to continue the conversation after recording as I often wanted to talk with them more and share my own views without my opinions influencing what was said in the recorded interview. I regretted this in some cases, because once the recorder was off each participant became more open about their views and so this was valuable discussion time, I feel this impacted on the richness of my findings. The interviews took place at each participant's place of work. As senior leaders traditionally have their own office, this allowed the participants to feel at ease and conduct the interview on their own terms.

### **Data Analysis**

Robson (2011) discusses the importance of reducing the data overload before the detailed analysis of each transcript takes place. Data overload means having too much data to analyse in detail. The first stage of my data analysis was to transcribe the interviews. Once the data was collected it was professionally transcribed. The transcripts were reviewed by the participants to ensure that they were correct.

The second stage was to listen repeatedly to the interviews to familiarise myself with the key ideas that came across in the interviews and assess whether they aligned with the key themes identified in the literature review. The analysis was achieved through what Creswell (2014) describes as coding. Firstly, each transcript was coded

for answers to the research questions. Once this first data analysis had taken place, a second process of coding was used to write a summary of each participant's answers to the research questions. A summary was important because it enabled me to rearrange participant answers from the interviews, which often veered away from the question being asked. The summaries addressed the questions in the designated order and featured quotations and phrases that each participant used. The themes referred to included: the glass ceiling and the external factors of societal expectations; the importance of mentoring; building up a reputation; gender discrimination; and agency. Based on the interview questions, the interviewees' opinions and experiences on these issues were clear. There were also issues that arose that I did not expect, such as the school as a flexible workplace and the clear pathways that enable teachers and middle leaders to aspire to the next step in their careers.

I was able to write the findings of the first two interview questions from this second level of analysis, while still referring to the original transcripts to help me to deepen the analysis through further examples. While writing the findings, I compared how each participant had answered the questions of, 'Do you aspire to become a principal? Please explain your reasons for this.', and 'When did you first decide that you did or did not want to become a principal? What were your reasons for this?' Wellington (2015) describes this as synthesising data. When addressing the barriers and enabling factors that influence women's decisions, I had to code across all three interviewees to pick up shared themes between the subjects before I could write up the findings (see appendix E for an example). The next stage of analysis is what Miles



and Huberman (1994) call data display, which is how the results are presented. I chose to focus on a written summary of findings, in which I cross-referenced the transcripts to find themes. The third and final stage was conclusion drawing. Conclusion drawing took place once convincing data had been analysed and was able to be summarised (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

While current literature offers reasons for the gender gap in leadership in secondary schools, data itself should guide the conclusions of the research, as this is a much more valid approach. Wellington (2015) offers an alternative approach by using the terms *priori* and *posteriori*. *Priori* research analysis focuses on pre-existing categories to analyse the data collected – in this case it would be applicable when considering structure and agency. The pre-existing areas were external factors out of the participants' control and the participants' own personal agency. *Posteriori* comes out of the emergent themes that became evident once the interviews were completed, and enabled me to consider new, emergent or more complex factors than *priori* analysis alone would allow. While previous studies have highlighted certain themes, this research had the ability to deliver a fresh perspective and it was therefore important to be flexible in this approach. Wellington (2015) states that emergent factors are the most common situation in research, as we sometimes find new ideas that can contradict or include deeper analysis than previous studies.

### **Validity**

It must be acknowledged that this is not the first study in the career history and aspirations of women educational leaders. However, my research may help to

externally validate the research if it aligns with studies from other Western democracies such as Australia, the United States of America, England and Wales. Additionally, when each participant's case is compared to the others, this allowed themes to be identified and thus confirmed internal validity. Wellington (2015) describes internal validity as whether research “measures what it is supposed to measure” (p. 41). In this case, I had to consider whether my findings were the reality of the factors which influence the career aspirations of women senior leaders in New Zealand secondary schools. If it was not the case, I would have needed to interview more women to improve the ability to externally validate the findings to make more accurate generalisations. However, expanding the research would not be appropriate within the confines of this study.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethics are often linked to morals and our ethics are certainly guided by personal and imposed morals from the institutions we belong to. Pring (2015) states that ethics in research are more a set of rules that enable the research to be valid and with principles. The following section of this report will outline the ethical considerations for the research. For research to be ethical Bryman (2012) highlights the need for respect of people’s rights and their dignity.

Creswell (2013) outlines the ethical considerations that a researcher should consider at various points of the research. When sampling candidates for research, in the initial communication I had to be fully transparent, outlining the purpose of contacting them and the purpose of the research. I did this by directly contacting the

participants where possible via email. I shared with them the participant information sheet (see appendix B). Once they emailed back expressing their interest, I shared the consent form (appendix C), which the participants were invited to sign and did so. It was important that participants understood the nature of the questions and maintained their right to privacy by being able to withdraw from the research at any time. Hammersley and Trainanou (2012) state that this is important to allow participants to maintain their privacy and minimise the possible harm that could come from the interview. Interviews were recorded, with permission from participants, and the transcriber signed a confidentiality form (appendix D). I gave each participant a copy of the transcript and gave them time to approve what was in the transcript and correct any errors, this limited any possibly of deception on my part as they had access to what they had said. Having a recording of the interview gave me information about their experiences and it was important that I kept their stories confidential. During the formal interview I was careful not to indicate my opinion to avoid altering the participants' responses, although after the interview when they asked me questions I did answer them as most questions were about my research and motivation for it, I did not disclose anything that is not included in this work. I did not tell anyone the identities of interviewees to retain their anonymity. All the data was stored safely and confidentially to protect anonymity. To protect the participants, during the write up of the findings I used pseudonyms.

## **Conclusion**

A narrative approach through a critical lens was the most logical choice for this research. It was clear, as the sampling and interviews began to take place, that being

able to connect with each participant on a personal level after interviewing them also informed my understanding of the factors that were influencing the career aspirations of the three participants. The data analysis process had many layers and as I peeled them away I found that the data reinforced previous findings in the literature, while also offering insight into other emergent factors. The next chapter will summarise the findings of my research from the three interviews I conducted. It will address each of the research questions in turn and show a detailed synthesis of the data collected.

## **Chapter Four- Findings**

### **Introduction**

Collating my findings was a dual process. I wanted to understand each person's experiences through my analysis on both an individual and a general basis. An example of the coding I completed can be seen in appendix E. The purpose of the findings chapter is to show how the data collected addresses the focusing questions of the research, to highlight the similarities between the participants' narratives, and to emphasise the different views and experiences of each participant.

### **Participant Aspirations**

The first question all participants were asked was whether they aspired to principalship. They were then asked to give reasons for their decisions.

Amina had mixed views on her aspirations to principalship because of her current life situation. She said, "In the long term I probably do (aspire to principalship), but in the short term I probably don't." Amina felt her strengths, such as pedagogical knowledge, would greatly assist her ability to be competent in principalship. She was also being encouraged by her mentor to apply in three to four years' time. Amina was unsure about timing when it came to promotion as it was a huge obstacle in her aspirations. As her youngest child was only three years old, she did not feel it was possible to be fully effective in both the roles of principal and mother, given the long hours her mentor put into the job. She believed that she still had 20 years until retirement and her aspiration was to become a principal once she had studied and her children were older.

Laura was quite certain that she did not have any aspiration to become a school principal. She was very new to the position of DP in a secondary school after 16 years working in tertiary study. She was passionate about her DP role. She stated that she was, “a good 2IC (second in charge)” and enjoyed the security of a mentor. She said she has “always had someone above me...I love that the buck stops with (them)”.

Laura did not have a whole school vision and said that she did not have “a reason why I would want to deal with buildings, bureaucracy...etc.” Laura was confident in her vision and drive about “making a difference for kids in classrooms”. Laura accepted the increase in portfolios as she progressed as a senior leader. She confessed that the role of “administrator holds no interest for me”. She was mindful in her perception of the principal’s role as a “lonely” job and that you needed to be “made of steel” to cope. She mentioned this twice, reinforcing her view. She did, however, acknowledge that her view about principalship might shift if she began to develop a school-wide vision that she wanted to implement.

Susan was at a different stage in her career to Amina and Laura and felt that she was “ready for a new challenge”. She had seven to eight years in senior leadership, three of which were as an AP. She was passionate about developing whichever school she was principal of, and said, “I want to work around establishing a really clear vision”. She understood the major differences between AP and principal. As a principal, “you don’t have the ability to immerse yourself” in specific projects you are passionate about, because the principal needs, “a much broader brief of everything, but

necessarily it's much shallower". Susan had already begun applying for principal positions both in and out of Auckland and so was set in her aspirations to become a secondary school principal.

Amina and Susan both indicated that they were determined to become principals within their careers, but Susan was much clearer on her reasons for this. Amina knew it was what she wanted, but there was a long way to go in both her professional and personal life until she would feel ready to "go for it". All three participants agreed that the job was different to that of a DP or AP, and Amina and Laura were both keenly aware of the work/life balance and lonely nature of the position. While Susan had also considered this, she had reconciled herself to the fact that she would have a different role and she did not acknowledge it to be a lonely job. Laura and Susan both discussed the role of vision in being a principal and, while Laura wanted to help someone implement a school-wide vision whilst simultaneously having a vision in her own area, Susan wanted to establish her own vision. The passion of creating your own school-wide vision which encompasses all areas of school life appeared to be a clear difference between those participants who aspire to principalship and those who do not.

### **Career Planning**

Whilst Amina first had the idea of becoming a DP planted in her head some six years ago by her previous principal, she only seriously considered it when she felt ready. She felt the same about her aspirations to principalship. She had 18 years teaching experience and several of those as a head of faculty or department. She saw a

position come up within her current school and applied internally for it. Although she said that she was mindfully working towards becoming a DP, she had worked hard at observing within the school for two years and had been working on “plugging the gaps” so that when promotion became a possibility it “felt like a natural progression”.

Laura felt that she had naturally moved into roles and said that “I haven’t always been driven – right, that’s where I want to go”. She was driven by where she felt she could make the most difference for students. She had taken a 16-year break from secondary schools to be involved in initial teacher training and within that role she was able to meet a wide range of senior leaders, which gradually helped her decide to move back to the secondary sector. She noted, “It’s been an evolving thing... it’s certainly not driven by ego... or money.” She supported this through explaining that moving back to secondary as a classroom teacher (at first) had led to a pay decrease, but this did not matter to her if she was making a difference.

Susan had decided to pursue principalship after gaining a position as an AP. She used her promotion to AP three years ago to help her decide, and said, “That was at the back of my head, do I want to be a principal?” Like Laura, she had also spent some time working for a tertiary institution but in secondary schools as a facilitator for literacy. Like Amina, she started to apply when she felt ready and had been in senior leadership for approximately a decade. She was clear, however, that it was not an early decision and she had not always been working towards this aspiration.



Not being solely focused on the top job was a common theme for all three participants. While they were all now senior leaders, all three were driven by wanting to help students achieve in the various roles they had held within secondary schools. All of them had experiences as heads of departments and faculties, but only Laura had experience as a dean.

### **Enabling Factors to Achieve Principalship**

Each participant was asked what factors had enabled them to progress so far in their careers, and what they felt would help them achieve principalship if that was their goal. A range of themes arose from this question and have been organised into four major themes. The first was mentoring relationships and support from other people. This was referred to by all three participants. The second most prevalent theme was the importance of education and experience. Two participants discussed more formal qualifications, such as a Master of Education or Educational Leadership, while Susan referred to the experience gained throughout her career. The third most discussed theme was about building a strong reputation and networking. Again, all three participants referred to this either directly or indirectly. Finally, three further factors were addressed by each participant. Amina felt enabled by a flexible workplace, Laura by a supportive partner who encouraged her, and Susan by the fact that most co-educational schools had a balance of male and female senior leadership members and this seemed to create more opportunities at that level.

### **Mentoring and/or support from others**

The most discussed theme by far was mentoring and/or support from others. Both Amina and Laura had worked with a female role model who had encouraged them to take risks and push themselves to aspire to either senior leadership or principalship. Amina credited her former principal with “planting the seed” some four years before when she applied for a senior leadership position, and she had continued to advise and mentor her even though they no longer worked together. Laura’s mentor had also advised her to go back into secondary education from tertiary to pursue her passions, and her current principal and other senior leaders had encouraged her to apply for her role as DP. Laura’s relationship with her mentor had reinforced her belief that she was a good 2IC and this has also influenced her career aspirations. Amina’s beliefs around mentoring have taken on a ‘pay it forward’ type of role. She described that she was passionate about developing middle leaders because of her belief that pathways were not always clear when she was a middle leader. She felt that without someone suggesting it, she may have just continued to work away in middle leadership as her pathway was not clear. Middle leaders are usually appraised by senior leaders and this provides a chance to develop a mentoring-style relationship if both parties develop a good working relationship and appraisal is valued in the school, rather than as a compliance exercise. Amina felt that often this opportunity was missed; she said, “When you’re HOF (Head of Faculty), appraisal is overlooked”. Susan felt that “no one specifically mentored me”. She did, however, acknowledge that she did not necessarily work directly with people who had supported her in her various roles, which did help her with her aspirations.

All three participants seemed, to varying extents, to be very passionate about the people who had supported them, particularly Amina and Laura, who seemed to have been strongly influenced by other female role models. Susan highlighted a lack of female role models as her perception of a barrier to achieving principalship, which perhaps goes some way to explaining the participants' differing views around having a mentor.

### **Experience and education**

The second theme that all three participants discussed was the importance of experience and education. This was largely because to reach principalship both are integral. While Amina aspired to principalship in the long term, in the shorter term she planned to study so that she would be better prepared once she wanted to progress. She recognised that she would need a study grant or award to allow her to take leave from work as she could not work, study and provide childcare at the same time. Laura had already participated in a post-graduate programme and said that her master's degree was "hugely significant" and she "draw(s) on it every single day". Although Amina and Laura were in different places with their academic studies they both considered it important as an enabling factor to help them achieve their aspirations. Susan focussed more on her experience gained in her career and how being "exposed to a wide range of initiatives", centred on how to "improve the way we teach", enabled her to see what could be done in other schools and to develop her own leadership vision.

### **Networking and building up a reputation**

Networking and gaining a reputation as a good leader was the third most common theme between the participants. Susan did not directly quote networking but had worked outside secondary schools and had also completed a secondment at the Ministry of Education and so would have built up a reputation and networked through this. Amina and Laura both explicitly discussed networking and building a reputation. Amina felt she had worked towards “having a strong reputation and being respected by your peers and getting out there”. This was an issue when talking about her role as HOF and her implementation of teaching and learning strategies learned in England that had not yet been implemented in her school.

Laura reflected on her time in tertiary as being a great place to meet a lot of leaders, specifically principals. She noted after considering her education that, “I guess reputation is a part of it, building connections and you’re proving in those connections what skills you have ....” Laura had drawn on her experiences at tertiary to help her to confirm her aspiration to be a DP but not a principal.

### **Flexibility of the workplace**

Two of the three participants explicitly referred to the need for work to be flexible. Laura had achieved this through maintaining a part-time position for 16 years. She acknowledged, however, that while she was paid part time she often worked much longer hours, but this was her choice. Her children were much older than Amina’s, meaning that Laura saw her ability to be part time as a decision and an enabling factor. Susan’s children were grown up and so she did not need flexibility in that area. Amina’s children were much younger than Laura’s so she had placed them in care

very close to the school which meant she felt accessible and available for her children while still being able to pursue her career. However, she particularly highlighted how flexible her school had been around her being a mother of young children and that they understand that she would get the job done. She said that they were “very, very, very accommodating here and really understanding. Never said no to me if I’ve needed to go to schools or anything...” Amina was very happy in her current role, and the understanding nature of the school was a definite factor in this. The fact that geographically she could keep her children close was a huge comfort to her.

### **Personal relationships**

While two participants brought up their spouses, Laura was the only one who highlighted this as an enabling factor. She said, “...my husband works from home so he and I have always been in partnership.” The phrasing of partnership shows Laura’s perception of her and her spouse as equals, but that for both, their children were “number one for us”. The other participant who raised the issue of being a mother cited this more as a barrier (discussed later).

### **Balance of gender in senior leadership teams**

Susan was the only participant who brought up being in a co-educational school as an enabling factor. She had noticed that co-educational schools did try to have a balance of male and female senior leaders on the senior leadership team which created a pathway to senior leadership for women. This contrasted with Amina who worked at a co-educational school that had once been a boys’ school. Although there was a

balance of men and women, she said that there was still a sense of a 'boys' club' at the school.

### **Barriers to Principalship**

As part of this research into the factors which influence the career aspirations of women senior leaders, the final research question asked participants to address the barriers they had faced in their career to get where they had, and perceived barriers to achieving principalship. I have organised this section into two areas in line with the positioning of this research. The first area is that women are influenced by societal and workplace factors which are beyond their control. I have called these external factors. The second area is that of agency. Agency considers the personal, conscious choices these women senior leaders have made in their careers for their own reasons. The multiple barriers that influence career aspirations participants raised are discussed next.

#### **External factors**

The most common issues raised were a lack of pathways, mentors and women role models in educational leadership in New Zealand. Another common factor highlighted was that there are different expectations of men and women in relation to both the job and as a parent. The principal appointment process was also criticised by one participant and, finally, two participants stated a lack of job opportunities in Auckland for senior leadership and principalship.

### ***Lack of mentoring, role models and pathways***

Amina was very passionate about creating pathways for middle leaders as it was something she felt was missing in her own appraisal process, as explained in the enabling factors section. Although this is not necessarily an issue specific to women, it was still an important point that was supported by other participants. Laura and Susan were both very conscious of the perceived lack of female role models in senior leadership. Laura wanted to ensure that in her current school the perception that men usually get leadership positions over women was challenged. She felt that even when processes were fair, women felt otherwise. She acknowledged that “visibility in leadership” for women was important and that hiring practices needed to be fair and transparent despite people’s perceptions. Her comments were less around principalship and more around middle and other senior leader positions. Susan went further and stated categorically that, “many women in my position would say that there is a lack of mentoring of women. We can see it happening with men more often, and because there are fewer women who are principals there isn’t a large support structure”.

### ***Principal appointment process***

Susan had four unsuccessful interviews for principal positions and said that most of these roles went to men. She felt there was a need to check these appointments to ensure more women who were capable were appointed. Whilst Amina was not yet ready for principalship she had noticed the same. She said, “We’re still talking about the glass ceiling in sociology and it’s so right. A lot of schools, the top jobs are always

men.” With 70% of secondary school principals in New Zealand being men (New Zealand Government, 2017), this perception is understandable.

### ***Lack of job opportunities in Auckland***

Both Amina and Susan raised the lack of job opportunities as an issue specifically in Auckland. It was clear from Amina that the positions are not always available, and you may have to move for promotion. Susan had already begun to look outside of Auckland as she felt she had a better chance of being successful as there is a perceived reduction in competition in the provinces for principal positions.

### ***Different expectations of men and women in the workplace***

One of the barriers to aspiring to principalship was the long hours Amina felt were required. She based this on her knowledge of her mentor, who was often the first one to school and the last to leave. Amina described this as: “her car was there at six o’clock in the morning and her car was there at seven o’clock at night”. In her observation, male principals did not keep the same schedule and she felt much of this was due to women having to take on domestic duties and be more flexible in their work hours. She said, “We know that that...principal and DPs for example in this school, their wives... in terms of the household and running the household, they actually take on those duties.” When talking about her own experience, her view was, “I do everything, and I get called superwoman by my children, it’s true, but the sacrifice is huge, and it doesn’t do you any favours.” Amina made it clear that she felt the expectations of a woman who was married with children and the expectations of a man who was married with children were different. This was the main issue that



she raised as a barrier to aspiring to principalship. Susan described the appointment of men principals over women as “the elephant in the room” and my interpretation of this was that schools preferred male principals.

### **Agency**

As explained previously, Smith (2011) describes agency as a consideration the personal, conscious choices these women senior leaders have made in their careers for their own reasons. It comes from the idea that it is not that women cannot become principals, but they have other priorities that take precedence over career aspirations. The largest barrier for all participants at some stage in their careers had been their decision to have children. The younger the children, the more this was a barrier. However, two participants were very clear that this was a priority for them, and their career and workload came second to their families. The second and final barrier was their dislike of what the role of principal would entail and, in some cases, this was enough to prevent them applying for this position.

### **Children**

Amina, Laura and Susan all have children. When I asked Susan if her personal life provided any barriers, her instant response was, “no, not really, my children are all grown up”. The fact that her children were not a barrier to her aspirations seemed to be more the timing of when I asked her this question, implying that at one point they would have been. She said she had only been thinking about principalship in the last couple of years and perhaps her children being grown was an enabling factor in this.

Laura's children were also not a barrier to her now but had been previously. She acknowledged that "maybe that's part of that thing. As a woman I needed to have that flexibility for my family, so I did take years of reduced income to make sure that I could do that". Despite being paid part time, Laura confessed she was "working 60, 70 hours a week" and this was all to maintain flexibility. She then said, "That's a bit mad." The flexibility of being able to be there for her family overrode seeking the appropriate salary for her work.

Amina had maintained a full-time position while having children, but she felt it had come at a price. She admitted that, "I've missed so many milestones in my children's lives. I've missed their first days at school. I've missed assemblies. I've missed so much and yet they don't have the same 'Daddy, you missed that' or 'Daddy, you don't take me in (to school)'." Amina felt quite strongly that while her school was understanding she still had a lot of pressures on her time and that because "all the other mums are there" at school and assemblies, "it's very difficult to explain to my children that that's not my set up". She had alleviated some of these issues by placing the children in care geographically close to her school, but she brought up the issue of children almost as soon as our interview began. It is obviously a contentious issue in her mind.

Ultimately, all the women had chosen to have children and had put their needs high in their priorities or at least tried to. The more demanding their job and the younger their children, the more delicate that balance was, and so it seemed that having

children delayed aspirations for women senior leaders who may one day want to become principals.

### ***The role of the principal***

The final barrier to becoming a principal was the role itself and whether this was something the participants really wanted. They all had different perceptions about why they would be apprehensive around pursuing this role. While Susan was in the process of applying, when I asked her if anything put her off the role she said it would be the fact that she would have to take a step back from projects she was particularly passionate about. There would not be an opportunity to do this as principal. However, she had considered this carefully and was not dissuaded by this aspect of the job.

Amina did aspire to principalship and it was ultimately her desire to achieve a work/life balance that put her off. She admired her mentor but was anxious about the number of hours she would have to give to that role and so was deferring her aspirations until she felt she could dedicate the time that seemed necessary. She said, “I think her work/life balance was completely out of kilter and the expectation around how I see it anyway, I don’t think it’s feasible (while she has young children).” Therefore, she had made a personal decision not pursue the role until she could do it to the level she perceived it needed to be done.

Laura was the only one of the three participants who did not aspire to the role of principal at all. Her thinking was partly in line with Susan’s in that she knew a

principal needed an overview of everything and could not focus on one area. Laura was particularly passionate about, “teaching and learning, outcomes for kids, shifting practice of teaching, mentoring, all that stuff”. She did not feel that was something a principal could focus on. She disliked the bureaucratic side of being a principal which was not just about teaching and learning, and so this was not an avenue she wanted to pursue. She also felt that the job was “a lonely position in my perception, whereas I’m really collaborative”. It was ultimately her belief that she would not be able to practise her passions if she was dealing with “buildings, bureaucracy and those sorts of things”.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, some clear themes presented themselves around the research questions. Amina and Susan, who aspired to principalship, were driven by making a difference to students’ outcomes, whereas Laura felt she could make more of a difference if she stayed as a DP, showing that the individual’s perception of where they could make the most difference was a motivation for all three participants. All three participants had made career decisions gradually instead of having long-term career plans. Their reasons for this varied depending when opportunities had come up or the stages they were at in their personal lives. The main enablers for participants could also be barriers depending on the age of the children and whether anyone had helped them to realise their potential. Even Susan, who did not feel she had been mentored at all, acknowledged that the lack of structure around mentoring women to aspire to leadership was an issue. Amina and Laura both explained that their mentors had pushed them, and both mentors had been women in senior positions to them.

Overall the main differences between the participants' perceptions around leadership were ultimately shaped by principals they had worked with. The next chapter will summarise the conclusions of my findings and offer some further steps to consider how the issues raised as barriers to women's aspirations could be challenged by employers or the Ministry of Education.

## **Chapter Five- Discussion**

### **Introduction**

The role of this chapter is to discuss how my findings in Chapter Four compare with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. One of the difficulties in organising this chapter is that in the findings many barriers are described as 'opting out' of principalship factors in the literature review. It is important to note that some of the barriers only become barriers when a woman decides to 'opt in' to principalship. This chapter is organised under the four research questions: Why do women choose or not choose to aspire to principalship? When do women make the choice to achieve principalship? What are enablers to achieve principalship? Finally, what barriers do women face when they aspire to principalship? I address each question in turn, providing a summary of my findings with literature to either support and/or challenge my research.

### **Why Do Women Choose or Not Choose to Become Principals?**

When asking the first research question, I found that two out of three of the participants interviewed did aspire to principalship. From this initial question, I found out the reasons that they had either chosen to opt in or opt out of the role. The following section firstly outlines why those participants who aspire to principalship did so and why the one who had decided to opt out had made that choice. Once the summary of my findings for this question has been addressed, I situate my findings within the literature.

### **Opting in**

Amina and Susan both aspired to principalship but were at different stages in that process. Amina was new to the job of DP while Susan had been an AP and DP for several years and so was already actively applying for principal roles. Both Amina and Susan felt competent in their ability to carry out the job; Susan because of her experience and Amina both because of her experience and the mentoring she had received from a previous principal, who she saw as a strong role model. As Amina was new to the role of DP, she felt she had time to get ready before she started to apply for principal jobs, but also noted that her young children were an additional reason she was delaying the decision to move up to principalship. For Amina, achieving principalship was a long-term goal. Susan did not mention her children when I asked about her aspirations, and it transpired later in the interview that her children were much older than Amina's. Susan's experience in leadership had helped her to realise she was passionate about establishing a clear vision for a successful school and this was something that drove her in her aspirations to principalship.

Susan's desire to establish a clear vision and make a difference to the outcomes of students was one reason she was opting in. Establishing a vision and improving outcomes is a factor also explained by Bush (2008) and Smith (2011) who both argue that leadership is about educational aims and that women who aspire to principalship do so as they feel they can make a difference in that role. McTavish and Miller (2009) also suggest that the shift around gender leadership and what is required of a leader makes principalship more attractive to women than in previous decades. This could explain why someone like Susan, who has had a long

career in leadership, gradually developed the decision to aspire to principalship. Amina's reasons for aiming for principalship were also aligned with both Susan and the literature. She was considering when the right time would be for her to make that move. Timing in each participant's personal life appeared to largely dictate their career decisions.

### **Opting out**

During the interviews, while one participant (Laura) indicated that she had decided to opt out of principalship, the other two participants also gave reasons why it was not necessarily a straightforward decision. Even those who aspired to principalship had weighed the pros and cons of this option and had both identified barriers that were preventing this from happening. The barriers they identified were: having a family; the glass ceiling; feeling like an outsider in a 'boys' club'; and being overlooked for principalship roles in interviews because they were a woman. These barriers will be discussed in depth in the barrier section of this chapter. This section will focus on the reasons Laura gave for deciding to opt out.

The main reasons Laura gave for her decision to opt out were the bureaucratic nature of the role, the loneliness and the need to be able to withstand criticism. Susan, although she aspired to principalship, explained that she understood as a principal she would have a broad and shallow understanding of different initiatives within the school, rather than in-depth roles on specific areas like teaching and learning and pastoral care that she had previously experienced. Laura, on the other hand, was put off by this type of role and felt she would have more of an impact in her current role.



Laura's views about loneliness were also supported by Amina. Both had concerns about the huge workload of a principal and how it affects your work/life balance. The following will highlight in more detail Laura's reasons for opting out and how the literature supports her perceptions by finding other women with similar views.

Laura was certain that principalship was not in her future and she had clear reasons for this. She preferred to be the second in charge within a school and saw her passion as teaching and learning, stating that she could not imagine ever being interested in the more bureaucratic and administrative side of principalship. Her perception of a principal's role had made her believe she could be much more effective in improving student outcomes in her current position of DP. However, Laura's lack of interest in the role of principal was not the only reason she was opting out of this career path. She also felt the role was lonely and that you had to be able to take criticism. She had held senior leadership positions in both tertiary and, more recently, secondary education. I felt that Laura was very assertive and clear in what she did and did not want from her career path. However, she did acknowledge that should she begin to have a clear vision over the direction a school needed to take, she might reconsider her position.

Laura's reasons were at first glance largely agentic and she had made a decisive choice based on her own perceptions. This approach is supported by Smith's (2011) study showing that women opt out because they want to, not because they feel they are unable to achieve principalship. Gilligan (1982) suggests that this is simply because women do not aspire to fit in with the hierarchy of leadership, because they

view relationships differently and it would therefore be unappealing to them. What was interesting about Laura's response was that she later explained that she had taken years of reduced income to work part time while she raised her children.

McKillop and Moorosi (2017) argue that women make choices like this because of the values they were taught in childhood. Although this had been her choice, it could also be interpreted as a barrier in line with Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) and Coleman's (2010) view that women manage family and career aspirations with a modification, postponement or balancing strategy. The different strategies of managing aspirations and life will be discussed further in the next section on career planning.

Overall, the key reasons for opting in to principalship were the opportunity to make an impact and establish a clear vision, with the key reasons to opt out being putting family first and career second, the loneliness of the role and its administrative nature. What I found particularly interesting was that, despite the levels of agency women perceived they have over their career choice, all three mentioned an external factor that had played a significant role in their decisions. For Amina it was the expectations of her as a mother and that she was required to be 'superwoman' to get everything done. For Laura it was the nature of the role and for Susan it was feeling as though being a woman was certainly putting her at a disadvantage in the recruitment process, even though she was determined, something which will be explained further later. The next section considers when women make their choice to opt in or opt out.

### **When Do Women Make Their Choice to Achieve Principalship?**

The purpose of the second research question was to better understand how far ahead the participants had planned their careers and the reasons for this. None of the participants had aspired to senior leadership early on their career and the reasons behind this will be explored. This section will also highlight how some literature shows a link between career planning and promotion for women and how more can be done to encourage women to aim higher.

All three participants interviewed had made career decisions gradually over the course of their lives. Principalship had never been a distinct goal from the outset. Amina was driven and had worked to fill gaps in her career so that she could move up the ladder when she felt ready. When she did move into senior leadership, it felt natural. Amina shared some similarities with both Laura and Susan, who had taken positions and had other career ideas in the back of their minds. With Laura, her move to tertiary and back to secondary had both been about timing and opportunity – she had not planned her career moves in advance. Susan had taken the AP role with the idea of becoming a principal in mind. She used the role to help her decide if a move to principalship was what she wanted, rather than taking the role because it would lead to principalship.

All three women appeared to be driven by their desire to have an impact and improve student outcomes. Laura put it well when she said it was an evolving process and that she had not been driven by money or status. All three participants had had

long careers that were far from over and they had moved up when they had had an opportunity to play a larger role in improving student achievement.

Some literature suggests that while some women do plan from the outset of their career (Smith, 2011, 2015) there are many women who aspire to principalship who make this decision much later. Smith (2015) suggests that the career decisions of teachers are made much earlier in their careers and there was evidence of it being a consideration, but not set in stone for the participants. The evolving career path that Laura alluded to is supported by Coleman's (2010) postponement strategy explanation as mentioned in the previous section. While it seemed Laura at first was applying a balancing strategy because she said raising their family was a priority for both parents, she was possibly using a postponement strategy as she had been part time for 16 years, by contract, even though she admitted she still worked full time. Now that her children were teenagers, she had moved back into full-time work. Amina was in a similar position and she was using the postponement strategy too while her children were younger, with a view to moving up the ladder later. Susan, whose family was older, was already applying for the principalship position she wanted. We might assume, therefore, that she too had postponed until her children were older.

### **What Are the Enablers to Achieving Principalship?**

All three participants indicated that, firstly, mentoring relationships and support from co-workers, secondly, education and experience and, thirdly, building up a reputation were all important enabling factors in their career aspirations. A flexible workplace

and supportive personal relationships were also considered important by two participants.

Mentoring relationships, particularly those with another woman, were proposed as a very important factor for both Amina and Laura. They both spoke often about a woman who had been their line manager or principal earlier on in their careers, who had pushed them to aspire to either principalship or senior leadership. Amina spoke of her mentor with great admiration and gave her the credit for first making her feel that senior leadership was a possible pathway. This relationship had continued after Amina moved schools. Laura, too, credited her previous line manager with encouraging her to return to the secondary sector, and current colleagues had encouraged her to move to DP within a year of her return too. While Susan did not have a specific mentor, she did acknowledge the importance of having support from colleagues.

As with mentoring, all participants were clear that they had only applied for positions when they felt ready and experienced enough. Experience varied between academic qualifications and work experience. It was clear that all three participants were experienced professionals who had waited until they were confident enough to pursue that next step. Amina's reluctance to rush the next step in her career was also linked to feeling ready.

Networking and building up a reputation were also mentioned both directly and indirectly by the participants. Amina and Laura were both direct on this factor.

Laura's time in tertiary and Amina's experience as a Head of Faculty (HOF) were both times in their careers where they had established trust with other colleagues and used networking. Amina's perception was that she had aimed to build up a strong reputation. While not directly mentioning the importance of networking and developing a reputation, Susan's actions of working with the Ministry and working in different schools proved she also valued this. Gaining a wide range of experiences showed that she valued having a reputation as an experienced professional.

A flexible workplace and supportive personal relationships were also enabling factors for the participants. Flexibility and understanding had allowed Amina to opt into the senior leadership at her current school and Laura's partner's support was given as an important enabling factor in her aspirations.

The first factor of mentoring relationships, particularly with another woman, are highlighted by Fuller (2009). Mentoring is a factor that Fuller (2009), Smith (2015) and Fushell and Tucker (2014) all identified as important in helping women aspire to principalship. In Fuller's study in Birmingham, England, she found that where the gender gap in educational leadership had closed, aspiring women leaders now had female role models within their schools. Fuller's (2009) study also made it clear that a lack of mentoring was still an issue in closing the gap in other areas of England and Wales. Fushell and Tucker (2014) recognised that, without mentoring, women lack the confidence to aspire towards promotion. This was supported by Thomson who argued that as women are often "overlooked as potential leaders" (p. 69) they therefore miss out on the mentoring process. Smith (2015) and Fuller (2009) both

recommended mentoring should start early to have a long-term impact. This shows that the positive impact that mentoring from another woman had on Amina and Laura is supported by the literature.

I was unable to locate any specific literature on either feeling experienced enough to progress or networking and building up a reputation as being enabling factors that influenced women's career aspirations in educational leadership. The issue of building up a reputation and feeling experienced appeared to be more about the participants' perceptions and how they felt they should appear to others before aspiring to a higher position. It is impossible to say whether such perceptions were specific to women or whether men also feel the same about networking and reputations.

Flexible access to childcare and further education were also important to Amina in particular, who wanted to progress in her career and be there for her young children. When discussing flexibility for working parents, Amina cited a flexible and understanding workplace as an enabling factor for her at her current school. It should be noted, however, that an inflexible workplace could easily be a barrier at another school, so while this was positive for Amina, it is hard to comment on other schools.

When considering the school's role in providing flexible options to provide training for middle leaders seeking senior leadership, I found little evidence of flexible leadership training provided by schools outside of a teacher completing a part-time Master of Educational Leadership independently in New Zealand. McTavish and

Miller (2009) found similar evidence of flexibility being a factor through their research in the UK around the flexible working hours and courses in the National College for leadership. However, as this is a more minor factor, it does not appear to be a fix-all approach.

### **What Are the Barriers to Achieving Principalship?**

When the final research question was asked of participants several barriers had already been discussed. The barriers the participants cited far outweighed the enabling factors the participants felt they faced in their career aspirations. The barriers I discuss in this section are: a lack of pathways to senior leadership; family commitments; the principal appointment process in New Zealand; and feeling like an outsider because of the glass ceiling. In Chapter Two the glass ceiling was included in the section on why women opt out of principalship, however, the glass ceiling was discussed more as a barrier by the participants and seems more appropriate in this section for the discussion.

All three participants raised the first barrier of a lack of pathways to leadership.

Amina highlighted that in her time as a HOF she did not think that clear pathways to senior leadership were highlighted for middle leaders, and this was something she was seeking to address in her role as DP.

The second most common barrier were the expectations of women in relation to family commitments. This was referred to directly by Amina and indirectly by Laura and Susan. All three women had children and how far this was a barrier largely



depended on the age of their children. When I asked Susan about whether family was a barrier for her she indicated that as her children had already grown up this was not an issue. Laura's children are teenagers and she is in her third year of full-time work after 17 years of part-time work. Her children had made her decide to put full-time work on hold until they were older. Amina worked full time as a DP and her youngest child was three years old, and while she was now a DP, her children's young ages were integral to her postponing seeking promotion. This gave a good insight into the three participants and their views around family commitments in relation to their career aspirations.

The literature looks at the family commitments' issue in two different ways. One is that family commitments are a barrier to progression, but the other is that women choose to put family first and do not see it as a barrier. However, if women are having to make that choice, it is a type of barrier. This belief is supported by Coleman (2010) who found that only half of the women headteachers in England and Wales in her study had children and only two-thirds had partners. When compared with male headteachers who were married with children, this jumped to over 90%. It is here that the modification, balancing and postponement strategies are key. Children and family are barriers to aspirations but Coleman (2010) found that women under 50 were managing this barrier much better to allow them to have both a family and aspire to principalship.

The third barrier raised by the participants was the principal appointment process. Susan was the participant who raised this as a direct issue as she had often found

herself as the only woman interviewed and so was consistently competing against men. Susan felt that in a big city like Auckland, men were favoured as principals and that she was going to need to leave Auckland to be successful.

There was no literature on the influence of geographic location on principal appointment processes specific to New Zealand, however, what was interesting was that in Fuller's (2009) study of headteachers across England and Wales, women were more likely to gain promotion in the largest city (London). It is, however, important to note that the reason it is easier to gain promotion in London is the shortage of teachers. We may find that in New Zealand (and Auckland) there may be a shift in the promotion prospects of women. As of 2018 the government has acknowledged that there was a severe shortage of teachers in Auckland and this is likely to get worse before it gets better. It is therefore possible that promotion prospects for women aspiring to be principals in Auckland may increase and this pathway may become more accessible in the future.

The fourth barrier was that the glass ceiling makes women feel like outsiders, which was raised by all three participants. Amina recognised that there were still barriers in place for women who wished to develop their careers. Amina noted that the glass ceiling was still an issue for women seeking promotion in some schools where leadership had traditionally been male. She also felt that in some schools, leadership was a boy's club that it was difficult to gain entry to. Susan did not specifically name the glass ceiling, but she also felt that being a woman put barriers in her way through boards of trustees not wanting to appoint women principals. Laura was mindful of

the perceived glass ceiling in her school and wanted to work towards changing this perception.

Blackmore (2013) and Coleman (2003, 2007) argue the role of leader has traditionally been carried out by men and this is one of the reasons women feel like outsiders.

Coleman (2003) further supports this argument through researching women head teachers who said they felt isolated even if they reached principalship, because they are challenged by some parents and teachers who do not think they should be there.

Blackmore (2013) believes that this issue is wider than just educational leadership and that it stretches across both the wider educational area and within our society.

Dreher (2003) recognises this is in part caused by the homogenous white, male structures on boards of governors and leadership teams which makes it more difficult for women to be accepted.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter addressed the research questions posed in Chapter One and sought to weigh up how far my findings aligned with the literature. On the first question of why women choose or do not choose to aspire to principalship, the most prevalent reasons for opting in were feeling competent and establishing a clear vision. The major reasons for opting out were putting family commitments first, the glass ceiling, feeling like an outsider in a 'boys' club', and being overlooked for principalship roles in interviews because they were a woman.

The second question investigated when women make the choice to achieve principalship. This had a complex answer, as most women must balance career aspiration with their personal lives and all three participants had postponed their aspirational goals.

The third question asked what the enablers are to achieving principalship, and both the literature and participants highlighted mentoring as a key factor in this area. In the case of two participants it had proved fruitful. The other major enablers were building up a reputation throughout your career and, for Laura, a supportive spouse.

The fourth and final question addressed the barriers women face when they aspire to principalship. This was a question that yielded rich and complex results that in some cases undid enabling factors. Just as mentoring was given as the primary influential enabling factor, the lack of it was an important factor stopping women from proceeding to senior leadership and principalship. The other major barrier for two of the participants was the expectations of women compared to men in the quest to achieve principalship. As Coleman (2003) explains, women who achieve principalship do so “against the odds” (p. 75).

The next and final chapter will address the validity of this study with consideration of its limitations and the next steps required for researchers of women in educational leadership.

## **Chapter Six- Conclusion**

The research undertaken during this dissertation sought to understand the factors that currently influence the career aspirations of women senior leaders in New Zealand secondary schools. The research drew on the narratives of three participants in the Auckland region who answered four questions. The first addressed whether they aspired to principalship. The second question asked about when they had made their career decisions. The third question enquired about what enabling factors they had experienced and what they felt would help them to achieve principalship. The fourth question centred around the barriers they had already faced or felt they would face in the path to principalship. This final chapter will address the overall conclusions to my research questions.

### **Why Do Women Choose or Not Choose to Become Principals?**

The first research question was motivated by my curiosity about why women choose to opt in or opt out of principalship. My overall conclusion to this question is that those women who choose to opt in, are driven by making a difference and enriching the experiences of students. They also choose to opt in because they feel confident in their ability to balance the constraints of the job with their personal lives. When it comes to those who opt out of principalship the reasons become more complex. I organised these reasons in two areas, external factors and agency. The external factors which were most prevalent in both the literature and the answers given by the participants were: the glass ceiling; perceived expectation that women leaders must take on masculine traits to be successful, and feeling like an outsider. The most

common agentic factors were: choosing family over career, having a negative perception of the principal's role and the competitive nature of leadership.

The glass ceiling, despite many breakthroughs by determined and capable women, remains intact in educational leadership, and indeed in the wider professional world. All three participants acknowledged this as a factor and the literature supported these perceptions strongly. The belief that women need to take on masculine traits to become successful is not surprising when women see men with similar experience progress beyond them. The male-dominated upper echelons of educational leadership also mean that even when a woman shatters the glass ceiling, she is prone to feeling like an outsider in a masculine world. Although none of the participants indicated that they personally felt this way now, two felt that simply being a woman hindered their ability to progress in Auckland.

The agentic factor of putting family life above career was suggested by both the literature and the participants as the primary factor causing women to, at the very least, postpone their aspirations or, at most, change them all together. If a woman decides to try and both have a family and seek principalship, then the opting out factor suddenly becomes a barrier. The second factor was perception of the role itself, as an all-consuming, lonely job that simply did not appeal. It is understandable that this perception would put some people off the job, especially if they are socially motivated individuals.

### **When Do Women Make Their Choice to Achieve Principalship?**

The second research question focused on when women made their career decisions to opt in or opt out of principalship. None of the participants had been working towards principalship from the outset of their career, which the literature supported as common. Women appear to make decisions based on opportunities as they arise and are likely to be balancing other life aspirations alongside career ones.

### **What Are the Enablers to Achieving Principalship?**

The third question that asked about enabling factors was relatively straightforward. Two participants felt that supportive partner and/or family was key to success if women were balancing family and career. A flexible workplace that understood the demands on teachers' time was also an enabling factor for the participants. However, the most influential factor for the participants was having a champion or mentor within the profession, who was usually female and encouraged career progression to the top. Two participants had experienced this and had only positive things to say about the impact this had had on them.

### **What Are the Barriers to Achieving Principalship?**

At times during the research it was difficult to ascertain whether an issue raised was a reason a woman may opt out or a barrier to their advancement. This was particularly true of agentic factors. Preferring to raise a family above career is undoubtedly a choice, but when the choice is made to try and balance both, children become a barrier for women aspiring to principalship. Children become a barrier through balancing family commitments with work commitments. The barriers of the

glass ceiling and applying for leadership positions in Auckland where there is tough competition also only become barriers when an individual decides to aspire to leadership. It is hard to say when the glass ceiling starts to become an issue; it could be for principalship in some schools or even middle leadership.

### **Areas Identified for Further Research**

While researching the career aspirations of women, I struggled to find any NZ-based research that focused specifically on educational leadership. Much of the research in the Educational Leadership field appears to be based in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia. Wider NZ-based studies are needed. There is also limited research on women principals in NZ and if and how they balance family and career.

### **Recommendations**

On multiple occasions, the aspect of mentoring appeared in the literature, not just for educational leadership but for leaders in general. Some literature suggests that to close the gender gap in this area, women must be exposed to leadership in their careers as early as possible. Learning leadership skills and developing leadership experience earlier in their careers means that if they do choose to have a family later, they will already have progressed in their career and be better placed to continue with their aspirations. The NZ government could invest more in women leaders and offer more flexible, fully funded training for emergent leaders who are in the early years of their career. They also need to provide clear pathways for middle leaders who aspire to principalship.



## **Limitations**

This study took place in the Auckland region with three participants. It was a small, focused study with several limitations. The first limitation was that it is impossible to make generalisations on such a small scale. The second was that with the focus only on Auckland, there is no way to know whether women in other regions face similar issues without further research. The final limitation was in my own role as researcher. I could have asked more probing questions and held longer interviews than I did in the tight timeframe I had. As a small-scale study my research will have a limited impact.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this research into the career aspirations of women senior leaders in secondary schools has added to the debate of why there is still a major gap between men and women at the top of educational leadership, particularly at principal level. The research confirms much of what the literature suggests as crucial ways in which women could be enabled in their career aspirations. To close the gap, earlier leadership training is key, along with flexible workplaces for those women who wish to balance the demands of leadership and family.

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## Appendix A: Ethics Approval



**AUTEC Secretariat**  
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E: [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)  
[www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics](http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics)

26 July 2017  
Eileen Piggot-Irvine  
Faculty of Culture and Society  
Dear Eileen

Re Ethics Application: **17/253 A critical narrative of the factors influencing women senior leaders' career aspirations in secondary schools**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the subcommittee of the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 26 July 2020.

**Standard Conditions of Approval**

1. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
2. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form: <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
4. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
5. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval for access for your research from another institution or organisation then you are responsible for obtaining it. You are reminded that it is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard.

For any enquiries, please contact [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)


Yours sincerely,



Kate O'Connor  
Executive Manager  
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: [jennarhodes@gmail.com](mailto:jennarhodes@gmail.com)

## Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI  
O TĀMAKI MAKAU RAU

### Participant Information Sheet

**Date Information Sheet Produced:**  
21/06/2017

**Project Title**  
A critical narrative of the factors influencing women senior leaders' career aspirations in secondary schools.

An Invitation

Kia Ora! My name is Jenna Rhodes and I am a Master of Educational Leadership student at AUT. This is an invitation to participate in my research. My research forms a dissertation which is my final module to completing this degree. Participation in my research project will likely benefit you in understanding your career aspirations more clearly and the reasons for them.

**What is the purpose of this research?**

The purpose of my research is to help me gain critical insight into the factors that influence the career aspirations of women senior leaders. As an aspiring principal this area is of personal interest to me.

**How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

The reason I have contacted you is that you are a woman in senior leadership in a large Auckland co-ed secondary school. My research has a particular focus on co-ed schools. I contacted your school first and sent this invitation.

**How do I agree to participate in this research?**

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible. You will be required to complete a consent form prior to the research being completed. If you are interested you can contact me at the details shown below.

**What will happen in this research?**

As part of the research I will need to interview you for approximately one hour. During this interview I will ask a series of questions about your career aspirations and the reasons for them. We can meet at a place of your choosing, perhaps at your work place if you have an office or in a seminar room on one AUT's campuses.

**What are the discomforts and risks?**

Most of the questions you are asked will be very easy to answer, they are just inquiring about your career choices and aspirations and how you have achieved your success so far. You may choose to disclose as much or as little personal information as you choose.

**How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

My questions are not invasive and there is an opportunity for you to give more or less information on each question depending on your views and insight into the reasons for your aspirations. You don't have to answer any question during the interview that you do not want to, and you may terminate the interview at any time.

**What are the benefits?**

The benefits for you may be greater understanding of your career aspirations. The benefit for me is that you will be providing valuable data to complete my dissertation. The wider community will also benefit through hearing your story.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

The data you provide will only be shared with people who have signed a confidentiality agreement (myself, transcriber, supervisor and editor) and I will use pseudonyms so that you cannot be identified in the findings.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

The cost to you will be an hour for the interview and the time it will take you to review the transcript of the interview. You will have a week to review the transcript.

7 March 2018

page 1 of 2

This version was edited in July 2016

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You have one week to consider this invitation.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

You will have an opportunity to view the dissertation if you wish and the transcript once it is complete. A summary of the findings will also be made available to you.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Eileen Piggot-Irvine. Email address: [eileen.piggotirvine@aut.ac.nz](mailto:eileen.piggotirvine@aut.ac.nz)

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, Kate O'Connor, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), 921 9999 ext 6038.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

**Researcher Contact Details:**

Jenna Rhodes. Email address: [jennarhodes@gmail.com](mailto:jennarhodes@gmail.com) work number 093074180 ext 867


**Project Supervisor Contact Details:**

Eileen Piggot-Irvine. Email address: [eileen.piggotirvine@aut.ac.nz](mailto:eileen.piggotirvine@aut.ac.nz)

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2017, AUTC Reference number 17/253.



## Appendix C: Consent Form



▲ **Consent Form**

**Project title:** *A Critical narrative of the factors influencing women senior leaders' career aspirations in secondary schools.*

**Project Supervisor:** *Eileen Piggot Irvine*

**Researcher:** *Jenna Rhodes*

☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 22/06/2017.

☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.

☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.

☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.

☐ I agree to take part in this research.

☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature: .....


Participant's name: .....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date: .....

*Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2017 AUTEK Reference number 17/253. Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.*

## Appendix D: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

	
<b>Confidentiality Agreement</b>	
<i>For someone transcribing data, e.g. audio-tapes of interviews.</i>	
Project title:	<b>A Critical narrative of the factors influencing women senior leaders' career aspirations in secondary schools.</b>
Project Supervisor:	<b>Eileen Piggot-Irvine</b>
Researcher:	<b>Jenna Rhodes</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I understand that the contents of the tapes or recordings can only be discussed with the researchers.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I will not keep any copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties access to them.
Transcriber's signature:	<u>T.K. Mendley</u>
Transcriber's name:	<u>Tracy Mendley</u>
Transcriber's Contact Details (if appropriate):	
<u>021 081 76002</u>	
<u>digitalfingers@mail.com</u>	
Date: <u>14 Sept 2017</u>	
Project Supervisor's Contact Details (if appropriate):	

Appendix E: Sample of coding or sample of thematic analysis

