

**Principal selection: homosociability, the search for security  
and the production of normalised principal identities**

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### **Is there a problem?**

The selection of principals has not been a focus of attention since the eighties when local selection, by merit, supplanted the centrally administered bureaucratic and hierarchical system based on seniority in Australian government education systems. Local selection by merit was the settlement negotiated between education authorities, teacher and principal unions, and, most obviously in the case of Victoria, parent organizations in the context of an upsurge of local community and teacher union and professional activism. Educational bureaucracies (as other public bureaucracies) during the 1980s were charged with being unresponsive to local demands and seeking to manage the minutiae of everyday life in schools. The 1980s witnessed first moves federally in Australia and other Anglo nation states towards public sector administrative reform based on notions of corporate management that emphasised devolution of responsibilities to local units.

The introduction of local selection based on merit during the 1980s was therefore in the context of partial decentralisation of administration (not devolution) to regions and schools in response to increased administrative complexity, the rise of parent organisations seeking to have greater input into educational policy and decision making, the institutionalisation of gender equity reform based on liberal notions of merit through equal opportunity policies, and demands by a highly qualified group of teacher professionals through their unions for increased involvement in local decisionmaking (Blackmore 1986; Blackmore 1990; Chapman 1990; Blackmore 1991). In Victoria, it was embodied in the 1982/3 Ministerial Papers that focused on school based decisionmaking, school councils, school improvement and local principal selection (Chapman 1990). Local school selection panels in most education systems were largely constituted by

various combinations of parent, employer (education authority), union and teacher representation, and in the case of Victoria and SA, Equal Opportunity representatives.

Principal selection, however, in 2001-2002 has become a major concern to employers in both state and Catholic sectors and also principal associations, with most principal association executives acknowledging that it no longer was effective in terms of selecting the 'right person for the job'. The selection process, as the primary 'gatekeeping' mechanism to the principalship, the position now seen to be the lynchpin of educational reform and school success, was seen to discourage many teachers from applying for the position (Lacey 2002). Second, there was a concern about the quality of leadership that the process produced, given the ongoing and wide ranging systemic reforms that principals are expected to implement and indeed initiate. Recent government reforms focus on building learning communities and networks, community based education, and industry partnerships. These new ways of organising learning require initiative and the capacity to manage complex institutional arrangements and relationships (Hargreaves 2003). Furthermore, curriculum and assessment reforms since 2000 (SACSA, Essential Learnings in Tasmania, New Basics and productive pedagogies in Queensland, and most recently Essential Learning 'Standards' in Victoria) are more student centred based on individualised learning, generic and specialist skills, knowledges and capacities rather than on a common overcrowded curriculum (Australian Council of Deans 2002; Lingard 2003). These trends put a substantive onus onto principals to be forward thinking and able to initiate and manage organisational and pedagogical reform.

Principal selection is also both for the system and local communities all about perceptions of risk in what are uncertain times for schools and students, as market based systems focus on images of schooling and how the representations of the principalship are symbolic of a school identity (Thomson 2004). Principals are also meant to be effective image managers, as well as financial managers, as any school's success and failure is closely related to community perceptions and media representations (Blackmore

and Thorpe 2003; Thomson, Blackmore et al. 2003). Organisational change theory also points to how selection and promotion procedures are sites of contestation between change and continuity. In the context of increased uncertainty and ongoing and often imposed rapid change, parents and teachers can crave for the security of continuity in what they know. How risk is understood and acted upon in particular contexts varies. Some communities and individuals deal with ambiguity, change, risk and uncertainty better; others fall back into positions of comfort and safety by selecting the familiar (Evans 1996; Boler 1999).

Add into this the issue of equity and diversity in leadership, and the mix becomes even more complex. While many individuals can ‘rationally’ accept the evidence that women are structurally and culturally disadvantaged over time, as presented in Merit and Equity training for example, this knowledge does not necessarily lead to actions in specific contexts. Gender equity is often about challenging gender identity, and equity policies are direct and often confronting to different modes of masculinity and femininity. Women in leadership deal not only with a fear of the feminine that characterises particular masculinities, but it also challenges those ‘emphasised femininities’ that have greater investment in traditional gender roles (Blackmore 1998). Gender is also inflected in education markets, and images of what constitutes an effective entrepreneurial or strong leader (Blackmore 1996).

The selection process for the principalship is the cumulation of numerous competing aspects of identity work for individuals and for schools. It is about making a collective investment for the future, a desire to deal well for the students and a fear of the unknown – tied up in questions about who we are and what we want to be. It is therefore highly emotional work. It is also symbolic and performative work, because any principal is publicly identifiable with the school. It also challenges individual and group notions of what is ‘normal’, and in particular highlights in some communities and individuals resistance to diversity and difference.

There are also other complexities at work here, in terms of systemic desires and representations of principals that can be read through various policy texts and discourses in the context of wider policy reforms informed by market and management principles. While premised upon the merit principle, any reading of the documentation that focuses on process and criteria and framed by system wide expectations and outcomes, indicates a particular normalised principal subject and a narrow reading of what constitutes ‘merit’ (Blackmore 2003). Systems also have a disposition to normalise the representations and work of the principalship eg prioritising financial management and strong leadership. And any reading of applications confirms this view.

### **Reforming the process**

Consequently, some education systems (government and non-government) have re-examined their approach to merit selection and either considered, or experimented with, ways to vary the current approach or to augment it in some way. Whether any of this activity has arisen in response to the findings of recent studies that linked the selection process with a decline in the number of applications for principal positions or not is open to speculation (d'Arbon 2001; Lacey 2002; Pritchard 2003). Our research findings from the Australian Research Council Discovery Project *An investigation of the declining supply of principals in Australia* indicate that selection has been and still is a factor, among others, to discourage many potential and capable applicants and therefore could contribute to the decline in numbers of people applying for principal vacancies. We have undertaken interviews with key policymakers in departments, principals associations, teacher unions as well as teachers and principals, as well as case studies of selection panels. We suggest that the merit selection process has not only affected application rates, over the years, but has adversely affected both the image and understandings of educational leadership. We argue that current selection processes have, on a large scale, produced ‘normalised principal identities’, an outcome at odds with equity and diversity policies and at odds with innovative practice in the principalship. Not only this, but principal selection is undergoing a kind of mutation as it becomes increasingly entangled

with succession planning at various levels of administration. There is no clear indication how this entanglement will cause selection to evolve in years to come.

### **Selection**

The selection process, found to be ‘too complex and intrusive and/or flawed’ (d’Arbon et al 2001 p 8) in one prominent study was identified, in another, as ‘a significant disincentive’ for people to submit an application when they felt ready for promotion (Lacey 2002 p 24). Lacey described it as ‘time-consuming, demanding and traumatic’, while Pritchard (2003) again identified the ‘flawed nature of merit selection’ as being problematic. Pritchard’s report shows that selection is by far the most important issue among government teachers in Western Australia (p 20) and that it is one of the three top issues among teachers in the Catholic system in that state (p 14). With 44% of government school survey respondents listing selection above all other factors in a list of disincentives there is considerable credence for the link between selection and declining applications for principal positions. It is evident that something has gone wrong with merit selection to produce such widespread disenchantment with the system. In conducting our own investigation we found, through contact with people who had either applied for positions (people who had either won and lost), had sat on panels, chaired panels, headed principal selection in their region or district, or had been part of professional and administrative organizations, that the merit selection system had become ‘superficial and prone to error’.

#### *Preferred applicants*

Ranking high amongst the problems associated with merit selection is the awkward situation involving incumbents. Evidence indicates that incumbents, most commonly, are selected in preference to ‘outside’ applicants for a position. School culture strongly supports the appointment of trusted individuals because ‘if the incumbent is there, and has done an OK job,’ one principal remarked, ‘and everyone who needs to is happy about it, then perhaps they should stay there’. This feeling, of a need to preserve the position for

someone who has given service to a school, but also because things appeared to be OK, was widespread. That effort was rewarded was a view that translated consciously and subconsciously, as well as effortlessly, from schoolroom to selection panel, overriding in some instances the principle of merit. Covertly, the selection of incumbents produced a system of rewards based on past reputation and investment in the job yet overtly selection panels maintained they chose according to merit.

Thus familiarity led to a pattern of 'reproduction of the known', a pattern replicated with known applicants (eg acting or assistant principals) to panel members often selected rather than 'unknowns'. There was an obvious trend for assistant principals being selected, producing an apprenticeship model based on localised knowledge. Knowing this, outsider applicants first question was often whether the position was 'really open' or a 'preferred candidate' was in the running. The other side was that the known was less risky and threatening than the unknown to local communities for both parents and teachers. The appointment of acting and assistant principals who were 'tested' and 'proven' led to a form of 'de facto' selection of the principal. A consequence of this trend to 'recycle' leaders has been that 'outsiders' have become discouraged from applying for positions where they know that an incumbent principal is reapplying. As very few incumbents do not 'regain' their positions, there seems to be no point in devoting time and energy to the process of application, nor does there seem any point in risking the emotional strain associated with being unsuccessful. This habit that had developed over time was critical in discouraging new applicants, those who were offering something different, or those outside the school. This trend has favoured conservative, safe choices that do not involve risk. But this pattern of selection has other implications, as regional directors and superintendents, and indeed other principals, can be interventionist is so desired. Therefore it was the case that appointing women as assistant principals or acting principals could lead to their later success in getting the job. Once experienced such leadership, having a woman often was less of a threat. In that sense, women can gain access through this type of 'accidental pathway' into the principalship (Blackmore and

Sachs forthcoming). At the same time, this pathway to the principalship is also open to old boys networks being mobilised in terms of the level of discretion possible in appointing acting principals.

Consequently, selection has the tendency to become more of a 'reproduction' model, in which those who do not fit a 'normalised principal identity' are excluded. That which is known or familiar or homosociability – the selection of people like oneself. The notion of merit selection has over time taken on different nuances and practices, and in so doing succumbed to reliance on pre-conceived ideas of what they are looking for when they select a principal. Indeed, in writing the job description, these ideas are elaborated on – as to whether schools are looking new a new direction, consolidation or moderate change. 'When I went to the last panel', one research participant told us, 'I was told that they were looking for a principal like they had for the last 13 years'. She missed out on being selected, having an agenda for curriculum review and innovation in contrast to the retiring principal. There is a problem, other research participants said, in panels not being ready for 'new blood' and, moreover, there is a problem in getting a fair hearing for a different kind of principal applicant. A district superintendent, highlighting this point, remarked that when she was involved with selection panels she could sometimes sense that '...if anyone startles the horses, then it's going to be really hard work to convince the panel to actually give them a shot.'

The picture emerged from the research results that a pervasive, conservative approach to selection, in both large entrepreneurial schools or small rural schools, limited the chances of applicants who had something different to offer a school community. 'I've had a circumstance where I was told I was the best applicant' said a principal with extensive experience, 'but I didn't get the job because the school council people weren't game to make a choice beyond what they knew'. Difference is risky and a range of emotions come into play.



In a sense emotions operate as protective psychological cues that warn us individually and collectively that something is in flux. What this points to is that there is a relation between trust, risk and emotion. Without risk, or the threat of destabilisation, emotions lie dormant (Berezin 2002 p 47).

Immediate past experience was often one of the key criteria that reflected a suspicion that time out from schools meant loss of a capacity to know and lead schools (in part due to rapid change). This principal had spent years as a consultant with the regional office and no longer fit the 'normal identity' of a principal as a practitioner. 'It isn't always a level playing field', he told us and he felt it was unlikely that he would face the selection process again. Social conservatism, a preference for 'safe' choices and a suspicion of theory produced conservative outcomes with regard to leadership.

Furthermore, local politics came into play with instances of a bias for (or against) particular applicants and 'rigged' selections. Our evidence indicated that these practices were not only common, and tolerated, but in some instances even condoned, as one participant led us to believe: '... it was clear that the school already had a particular outcome in mind', he said, 'and they instructed the panel to deliver that result. That is not necessarily a criticism of the people involved', he continued, 'they were clear about what kind of person they wanted in their school'. While his comments, on the one hand, suggest that he acknowledges a kind of legitimacy in the practice in that schools seek what they perceive to be 'best fit' for new appointments, he was not entirely comfortable with the notion of how 'fit' was understood or with the lack of openness to alternatives. 'The disappointing thing, in my view', he said, 'was that ... they weren't prepared to look objectively at the credentials of two of the applicants'. Regretfully, he conceded that the efforts of some of the panellists to get a fair hearing for people who, he believed, 'would have been perfect for the school' had failed. The culture of leaders picking or 'grooming' a successor before they move on 'is not far from the surface right through the

organisation', a research participant speaking from a managerial perspective believed; it is a culture that produces leaders who are, in many ways, alike.

The selection process, and with it principle of merit itself, has, for many people, become meaningless. Feminists have long argued that the notion of merit itself is a social construct is not neutral, as it reflects the experiences of those already in the job and those who define merit, and thus can often consolidate rather than transform organisational hierarchies (Burton 1993). Merit was institutionalised through the selection process with the collapse of seniority as the basic mode of promotion. During the 1980s it was also linked to equity, as most gender equity policies were informed by liberal feminism that argued that women who have the same skills, attributes and capabilities as men (ie the male norm) should be appointed regardless of their gender. Merit and equity was also premised upon procedural justice, with the assumption that organisational cultures were also gender neutral, which organisational theorists have refuted (eg. Bacchi 1999; Aaltio and Mills 2002; Alvesson and Due Billing 2002). Concerns about the merit principle was made explicitly in some interviews while in others it was merely hinted at. A staff representative on a selection panel described in detail, a situation involving blatant disregard for merit, described how her colleague on a panel, a person of highest influence in the school, made his preference for a particular applicant abundantly clear at the time of the panel interviews. Using body language that favoured a certain applicant and avoiding eye contact with other applicants, he created an atmosphere of expectation – he wanted a particular outcome. Pressure, indirect as it was, for panellists to comply with his choice, succeeded in bringing about the result he sought, either because they were had unable to deny him the support he needed, to get the assistant principal he wanted, or because they were afraid to disagree with him.

Likewise, the influence of district superintendents and regional directors in the selection of principals had, at times, been considerable. Often a systemic disposition was mobilised due to concerns about risky behaviours by principals that could lead to poor publicity,

complex management issues, or of course the infrequent but extremely messy business of removing principals. They promoted people who would not ‘rock the boat’, for example, be it directly, or indirectly, through a representative who had been appointed to head a panel. Rocking the boat could also, in corporate times, be seen to be someone who did not display compliance with system wide reforms and directions. But this was also the level at which networks could be mobilised. Notorious among this kind of practice was the existence, in one regional centre, of ‘a very strong men’s group who promoted their mates’, a group which, by 2004, had largely dwindled away after having been strong for many years. This network wielded considerable power as to who got appointed. As in this case, these were often ‘old boy networks’.

Many research participants believed that women, in general, still faced an element of disadvantage as leadership positions continued to be perceived, by conservative panels, as belonging to men. There was an enduring association between masculinity and strong leadership (disciplinary and directive). ‘I would say’, one male principal said, ‘that my female colleagues have had to apply more widely’ though many were competent and highly talented. Although prejudice against women had fallen away considerably at an organisational level, that is, that is, within the Department and in most schools, he believed, it continued to exist in some localities as ‘... some communities have some old-fashioned, deep-seated attitudes towards appointing women to leadership positions’. Brooking et al’s study (2003) of New Zealand principal selection processes and Blackmore and Sachs (forthcoming) study in Australian schools indicated how in the context of market discourses gender interplayed with locality – with conservatism evident both in rural communities but also the more traditional academic/elite school communities, where masculinity was linked to entrepreneurialism, informed most recently by discourses about between ‘masculinity in crisis’ and ‘feminised’ schools. The equity discourse of gender balance often works against women. Having a woman principal often meant having male assistant principal, or once a school had a female principal, then a male principal should be next. Yet all male school leadership teams were not uncommon.

The selection of predominantly men, in some regions, has enabled the ‘closed circuit’ of masculinist reproduction in leadership to endure.

*Panel competency*

Prejudice and bias among panel members, as much as dominance of panels by prominent, influential people usual in the play of any committee, seem to have permeated selection. Yet most members of selection panels have been trained in merit and equity. In Victoria, the departmental representative is the designated ‘merit and equity’ advisor, and all selection panels have training session. But our data suggests that other factors than ‘merit’ come into play at particular moments in the selection process. Discussions of an applicant’s ‘suitability’ according to the set selection criteria easily slides into a discussion of unrelated things; like whether a person will have the energy and drive to see through a five or eight year appointment or whether someone will be adversely affected by travelling a long distance to work (with the often unspoken thoughts around the familial responsibilities of women in particular). In one of our case studies of a selection panel at work, when a decision about which principal could not be readily made on the basis of the set criteria alone, an array of biases and prejudices entered the discussion, the discourse shifted from seeming transparency focusing on process to personalised discourses. Once the discourse shifted away from merit (‘how the candidate fits the criteria’), the discourse reverted to intuition and the personal (that is, matching applicants to their personal view of what a principal should be). This made evident how some members of panels lacked a wider sense of the job of the principal, or lacked prior experience in such appointment processes. Such modes of (in)competency again promoted the ‘reproduction’ model of selecting principals who were familiar and with which panel members were comfortable.

Data from the case studies and other sources showed that principal applicants needed to present a ‘normal identity’ in order to succeed in selection, to produce a performance that did not differ too much from what schools and systems currently perceived as a ‘good

principal'. Applicants who used a lot of educational jargon, it seemed, did not fit into the category of a normal identity, reminding panellists, instead, of an academic, a person whose work is at different level of education, with theory and therefore, presumably, not good at practice. We observed an interview where someone, who had studied at Masters level and spoke about educational issues in a scholarly way, quickly alienated a number of panel members with his sophisticated use of language. Either because they were not from an education background, or because they had not furthered their professional learning in a formal way, some panellists appeared unable to understand what the applicant was speaking about and they became confused or unsure about how to judge him. They openly showed dislike for the applicant: he had talked 'above their heads' and was the first to be struck off the list. Panels (parents and principals) sometimes displayed a strong anti-intellectualism and resistance to 'theory' as opposed to practice. Individuals who undertook post graduate research were often assumed not to be able to deal with the everyday and practical but also seen to be 'self interested' in terms of their own professional development. The irony of a well informed, articulate applicant who had undertaken significant professional development (eg post-graduate courses) being disadvantaged by demonstrating 'knowledge', a key word on the list of selection criteria, raises the question whether selection panels are well positioned to carry out a fair analysis of applicants' merits. 'When you go into a panel', one principal participating in the research observed, 'what is it that the parents want to hear?' She had learnt from experience that 'they want to hear that you like kids and that you're going to make sure the kids are safe and have the best opportunities.' They select 'safe' principals: someone they feel comfortable with both personally but also intellectually.

The case studies showed a preference, among a majority of panellists, for applicants with a humble predisposition, people who were mild, if not meek in behaviour: applicants showing vitality and a sense of robust humour were not as well liked. We noted an example of a female applicant with a 'calm presence' and 'gentle loving qualities' rating highly among a few panellists, as if these were qualities central to principal selection:

similarly, a male applicant with a 'loving, soothing style' was quickly short-listed while others better fitting the written selection criteria were given comparatively little consideration. We observed a long, hard battle for the other panellists who were more aware of the criteria and also issues of merit to get some control of the proceedings, to get a fair hearing for the other applicants. This was not atypical. Here the role of parents is seen in particular to be something to be reviewed. Questions surrounding panel performance have led Victorian primary principals to successfully campaign, through their professional association, for the inclusion of a second principal on selection panels, to counteract such tendencies (but also one could argue, to consolidate the reproduction model further!). A second principal on the panel, they maintain, improves the capacity of a panel to make decisions on the basis of knowledge and understanding. In South Australia a debate is in progress about panel composition and panel competency as part of a review of selection. In the Catholic sector, there has been experimentation with a central selection panel for a pool that establishes whether an applicant has the knowledge and skills against system requirement prior to local selection where specific requirements of schools are considered.

Winter and Jaeger (2002) in a national US study of panel competency and its implication for school leadership utilised simulation of a selection process. Teachers and parents on the panel selected the person they believed to be the most experienced and according to demonstrated performance in communication, management and educational leadership. The researchers concluded that the competency of teachers and parents in making principal selection decisions was 'open to question'; that is, parents and teachers could not accurately pick the most experienced applicant. Winter and Jaeger concluded: 'Placing the administrative task of principal selection in the hands of people lacking experience in personnel management is a practice which should be re-examined' (p 5). In Victoria, the notion of a similar central selection panel determining who constituted 'a pool' of applicants for local selection is one possible alternative in reviewing the principal selection process.

*Inconsistency of decisions*

Those highly experienced in principal selection label merit selection as a 'lottery'. Rather than a reliable system that serves education communities well it has been seen, by some, as being unsystematic and unpredictable. 'The selection came down to personal, individual preferences of panel members', recalled one principal, who had served on several panels. 'If you had taken one panel member off and replaced them with somebody else who had a different set of values and different life experiences or different priorities you would have had a different result, I think.' He used the metaphor 'a toss of the coin' to describe how a final decision was made in a close contest between two applicants.

This inconsistency in decisions made by selection panels was arguably facilitated by the lack of rigour in the process. A research participant described the ease with which any applicant could be discredited, simply by a panel member categorising their application as inadequate, just one word. They could claim, for example, that parts had not been 'expanded' or that unsubstantiated 'assertions' had been made: it has been 'very easy' to manipulate selection in this way. It was a common experience, for principal applicants in both states, to have made an impression on a panel at one school and fail to do so at another. Selection as 'a bit of a lottery' rather than a fair and respected system of promotion was a big issue with principals in South Australia. The gamble here depended on an individual applicant's impression with different superintendents. District superintendents, highly influential in principal selection, admitted that they 'do not leave selection to chance'. They ensure that the 'right' applicants, according to their judgement, are prepared for selection. In the official discourse, superintendents sought consensus decision making by selection panels but unofficially they used the system 'unashamedly', as one confessed, to get the outcomes they wanted. Over time, this manipulation of the merit selection process has disenchanted principal aspirants and principals seeking transfers alike. Selection was unlikely if they did not 'fit' a particular mould that pleased

the superintendent or did not belong to an inner circle that increased their chance of selection. 'The relationship that existed between the successful applicant and the district superintendent was well known across the system', one research participant told us as he related his experience of an unsuccessful application; '... it's not a fair and open process', said another, 'and people are saying, well if it's that blatant, why bother?' The number of applicants has declined as a consequence, with only those willing to fit into preferred models, in one district or another, remaining in the pool. Because of the power relation embedded in this arrangement, the process encouraged both conformity and compliance amongst aspirational principals as well as existing principals.

### **Selection and principal identity**

It is evident now, when reviewing two decades of merit selection, that the system has enabled 'preferred applicants' that 'fit' particular local and systemic dispositions and images to emerge as a dominant group in school leadership. Conservative panels have elected conservative principals; people 'at the top' have selected and inducted those who conform to their idea of leadership to take over; and schools themselves have encouraged this form of homo-social reproduction by repeatedly selecting incumbents regardless of alternatives but overlaid by an element of chaos (the lottery effect). But in the main, the effect has been of reproducing a 'normalised' principal identity leading to 'cloning' leaders (Green 2002). The issue now is less about the process or the concept of merit, but what is required of principals in the future and how can selection processes produce outcomes that meet that agenda. The current system of selecting principals in Australia is so restrictive, one research participant said to us, that there was no alternative but to 'flip it right over'. In her estimation the current system was 'stale' and a fresh start was the best way to deal with reform. Other participants, sharing this view, expressed concern that 'tinkering at the edges' was futile, and believed significant changes had to be made if there was to be any significant improvement. What then are the alternatives?



In the UK where local self management has existed for the three decades, different approaches have been pursued. Selection is no longer restricted to a written application and an interview but includes a practical component, if considered relevant, of some kind. A short-listed applicant may be asked to meet the school staff and conduct a meeting with them or they may be asked to engage in debate with a student panel. The system has developed so that the selection of a principal involves a lot more than asking five people on a panel to make a choice; the process is more open and participatory; it may take place over several days.

A pilot project in Western Australia has neither turned the selection process on its head nor 'tinkered' at the edges but has explored the possibility of extending and diversifying the process. In 2004, principal applicants for Level 6 secondary schools who were shortlisted were asked to participate in a number of 'tasks' that are 'grounded in the everyday work of principals' (The Leadership Framework [www.eddept.wa.edu.au/lc](http://www.eddept.wa.edu.au/lc)). Each of the tasks involves stimulus material – some school data, a student profile or an article from a publication, for example – which is given to an applicant who then gives a sustained response to the materials, showing their understanding and problem-solving skills as they do so. To avoid subjective assessments of the tasks, performance is measured in relation to standards set out in a Leadership Framework: the developers of the system feel confident that objective assessments of a person's abilities can, indeed, be made. If the pilot project is judged to have been successful there are plans to incorporate this new 'instrument' for principal selection, regularly, into a selection process that currently involves a written application, referee consultation and interview. In the independent school system there has also been experimentation with selection, using a consultant to guide the selection panel, for example, and expanding the time frame that selection takes (Thomas, 1999).

In Victoria, *The Blueprint for Government Schools* (2003) Flagship Strategy 3 is about Building Leadership Capacity. The first item is that ‘an improved principal selection process’ (p. 3). The major elements of this are:

- Introducing modern recruitment practices rather than basing selection decisions largely on the results of interviews
- Increasing principals’ representation on selection panels.
- Tailoring of selection criteria to reflect the differing needs and characteristics of schools, including key goals and targets, and the expectations and requirements of the system
- Proactively encouraging applicants with the required profile to participate in the selection process
- Encouraging more contact between candidates and the employing school to facilitate two way communication (p. 17).

The focus is also on succession planning to be undertaken by principals, with the aim to identify and nurture new leadership talent in order to attract and retain ‘good’ teachers and ‘potential’ leaders.

The question is whether any of the above alternatives will achieve the claims of policy to encourage improved student learning and innovation. To take that seriously would perhaps mean mounting a stronger argument for increased diversity of leadership. As one principal commented, the notion of best fit often means meeting the current needs of the school rather than its future needs in five years. To do that would mean focusing first on organisational redesign to meet the changing relationship of education, community and work, notions of schools as learning communities, of creating partnerships with industry for workplace learning, of developing problem solving capabilities in students with the collapse of theory/practice dichotomy, increased inter-disciplinarity and the focus on individualised pathways, authentic curriculum and pedagogies in community based education. This may then lead us to consider how we would redesign leadership (see Thomson and Blackmore 2004). How would potential leaders be identified and nurtured,

what type of leadership education would this demand, and what type of selection process would this require.

Education systems in Australia are currently engaged in reviewing and revitalising principal selection within the context of reforms in curriculum, pedagogy, teacher education and workplace learning. Current selection processes, in their best form, are no longer adequate to meet these new demands. Previous reviews of merit selection have largely been incremental, marginal improvements and adjustments. At the same time, in practice principal selection has intersected, due to the trend of appointing acting or assistant principals, unavoidably, with succession planning, which has through the pathways for leaders in schools produced a 'de facto' principal selection process. More formal succession planning has itself arisen as an issue because of the perceived lack of quality applicants (See special issue *Australian Journal of Education* 2003, Carlin et al, 2003; Lacey 2003b). Merit selection and succession planning are both complementary and incompatible (Lacey 2003a p 5). Succession planning is about anticipating future needs in leadership, about identifying the right people to fulfil those needs, about attracting those people, giving them opportunities to develop and providing incentives. Although the expectation is that formalised succession planning will eliminate informal practices of the past, where 'job incumbents tend to groom successors who resemble them' (Lacey 2003b p 2), it appears likely that succession planning will reproduce the normalised principal identity and thus become de facto selection of the principal!

As we have indicated, the relationship between power/knowledge as articulated in the language and discursive play of selection panels despite the emphasis on merit criteria and procedural fairness. While this can never disappear, the future possibilities for making the job more attractive and inclusive of a wider range of applications will require reforming the selection process so that applicants can be judged by multiple stakeholders in schools, and in a range of leadership capacities, but also broadening community and system wide perspectives on educational leadership that will be more open to diversity.

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