# Better the devil you know? Internal and external candidacy for leadership roles in an Australian State school system

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Research regarding the recruitment of principals is well established in scholarly literature. However, scant research has been undertaken to scrutinise the perspectives of principals in the New South Wales Department of Education (NSWDE) regarding their merit selection practice and the extent to which school-based leadership recruitment decisions are determined objectively and in accordance with meritocratic ideals. Consequently, this paper reports on an Australian study undertaken in the state of New South Wales (NSW) to ascertain the extent to which government school principals employed by the NSWDE, favour internal selection (the promotion of teachers from within their own school) when merit-selecting deputy principals, assistant principals and head teachers. The study draws upon interviews with principals concerning their approach to the merit selection of school leaders, and the analysis of data from an online survey of principals to determine the extent to which they utilised their school's 'internal labour market' to assemble leadership cadres. Based on the findings of this investigation, it is argued that the NSWDE merit selection process disadvantages external applicants seeking school leadership positions, thereby depriving many schools of quality leaders who have the potential to drive both educational change and innovation.

## Introduction

The question of how school leadership positions are allocated has long been of anecdotal interest to teachers and scholars - especially with regard to questioning the reliability of school-based merit-selection. The research reported here is an investigation into a phenomenon that occurs within a specific or bounded context (Miles & Huberman, 1994), namely the merit selection practices of government school principals working within the leadership recruitment regime currently used by schools in the New South Wales Department of Education (NSWDE). Further, it seeks to determine both the extent to which principals' favour internal selection, and how they apply merit selection theory to their leadership selection practice.

## The characteristics of merit selection theory

The cornerstone of contemporary meritocratic discourse rests primarily on a justice narrative pertaining to the ideals of egalitarianism, rationality and fairness (Thornton, 2013). The implication is that, the appointment of new school leaders should be governed by an objective assessment of 'merit', excluding inequitable 'non-merit' variables such as status, patronage, seniority and gender. Hence, competitive meritocratic selection is generally regarded to be a neoliberal artefact that relies for its existence upon the operation of a level playing field to remedy the abovementioned inequalities (Littler, 2017). As a consequence, many scholars consider merit selection solely as a comparative assessment of applicants' capabilities, talent, and attitude (Jackson, 2007; McNamee & Miller, 2004).

The merit selection process first came to prominence during the Industrial Revolution where it was considered to be an integral component of the *liberal thesis of Industrialisation* – a theoretical premise characterised by a movement from 'ascription to achievement' as the primary means of social selection (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Lipset & Bendix, 1959; Whelan & Layte, 2002). Therefore, the selection of employees 'on merit' has evolved to become a key attribute of highly educated, industrialised, democratic societies (Whelan & Layte, 2002).

Further, the notion of 'meritocracy' or a social order built around the perception of merit (Fox, 1956; Young, 1958) has garnered wide acceptance as a positive ideal (James, 2012; Littler, 2017; Moore, 2000), despite being 'coined' by Young (1958) as a pejorative in his dystopian novel, *The rise of the meritocracy*. Interestingly, both terms were co-opted by the political narrative of the late twentieth century to be aligned as it were, with both capitalist (equality of opportunity) and socialist (equality of outcome) discourse (Littler, 2017). Hence, our contemporary understanding of both merit and meritocracy is seen through the prism of workplace-justice (Muchinsky & Culbertson, 2015; Son Hing et al, 2011) whereby an applicant's superior skills/abilities are believed to override 'non-merit' variables such as age, gender, ethnicity and social class. Indeed, merit is now considered to be a positive ideal against which societal imperfection can be measured (Allen, 2011; Breen, 2003; Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001).

Despite the above optimism, Roithmayr (1997) and Williams (1991) believed the merit selection paradigm to be a form of 'socially accepted subjective preference'. Similarly, whilst schools in Hong Kong operate in markedly different political and governance contexts to Australia's, Walker and Kwan (2012) have found that the 'purposive and subjective nature' of its merit selection process was based on 'factors other than those specifically related to the job.' In particular, they highlighted 'selection panel favouritism' with applicants screened out (or in) for the "wrong reasons" (Walker & Kwan, 2012, p.192). Indeed, they found that leadership recruitment was influenced by the extent to which applicants demonstrated a specific 'relationship' with a given school's values and operation. They also reported that schools valued 'affiliation, loyalty and long service' when making recruitment decisions noting that, where applicants were 'unknown', it was not uncommon for selection panelists to obtain information about them 'informally' via social networking prior to the shortlisting process. Equally, Blackmore, Thomson and Barty's (2006) Australian study also highlighted the significance of favouritism and the so-called 'hidden rules of selection' that preserved leadership positions for incumbents who had given good school service. As a consequence, their prior effort and reputation often made them, in the eyes of the selectors, 'the best person for the job'.

A common research finding pertaining to internal selection is that despite the existence of merit selection protocols, evidence of a link between internal selection and employability is quite influential. This is particularly true within U.S. schools where teachers are appointed to school districts rather than specific schools, and hence derive promotional advantage from being 'known' throughout that locality (Buckman, Johnson & Alexander, 2018). Further, their school-specific professional learning and local knowledge position

them to be the 'best fit' for their school (Hatch & Dyer, 2004; Palmer, Kelly & Mullooly, 2016).

## The merit selection process in NSW Government schools

The NSWDE has operated as a government instrumentality since 1848 and currently oversees one of the largest educational jurisdictions in the world comprising a total land area of 800,642 square kilometres (Geoscience Australia, 2018), with 65,714 full-time teachers (NSWDE, 2017) and the responsibility to provide state funded education for approximately 791,763 students (NSWDE, 2017) located in 2,208 primary and secondary schools (NSWDE, 2017).

Teachers seeking promotion in the NSWDE are generally motivated by many social (school-aged children, proximity to family) and professional (income, ambition, experience) factors. However in NSW, teachers' career trajectories are subject to the imprimatur of the NSWDE given its statutory responsibility to monitor and provide final approval for all school leadership recruitment decisions. It also delegates to Government school principals the responsibility of convening merit selection panels for the recruitment of deputy principals, assistant principals and head teachers. NSWDE principals therefore fulfil the role of being the on-site senior educational and administrative school leaders. They are also assisted by other senior leaders, notably deputy principals who, when required, can assume the role of principal at short notice (De Nobile, 2018). Middle-level school leadership roles are also evident at assistant principal (primary) and head teacher/coordinator (secondary) levels (De Nobile, 2018; Dinham, 2016).

The merit selection of the abovementioned school leaders occurs when a vacancy arises and principals are called upon by the NSWDE to convene selection panels. The resultant panels comprise the principal or nominee at a higher level than the executive position being filled (convenor); a teacher representative (elected by the teaching staff); a nominee of the Director: Public Schools NSW (at the same or higher position than the vacant position); a parent nominated by the school Parent and Citizens' Association and, where applicable, a local ethnic community representative. Of these, at least one male and one female (sic) must be panel members (NSWDE, 2016). Further, once the panel has been established, it determines the selection criteria; writes and submits the job advertisement to the NSWDE for approval and eventual online posting at Jobs.NSW; short lists applicants for interview; conducts interviews; contacts referees and, ultimately, recommends the successful applicant to NSWDE (NSWDE, 2016).

The significance of the NSWDE merit selection process has grown in recent times as a consequence of scholarship consistently identifying a direct link between 'expert', multiple-level school leadership (Bush & Glover; 2014; Crawford, 2012; Dinham, 2016) and enhanced school culture, growth, and student achievement (Coelli & Green, 2012; Huber, Saravanabhavan & Hader-Popp, 2010; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2006; Smith & Piele, 2006). This aspect, coupled with increased political and

community expectations (Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Marks & McCulla, 2016), has resulted in a tendency for NSWDE principals to select 'safe', 'known' leadership applicants (Gronn & Lacey, 2006) who 'best fit' their school's context (Palmer et al, 2016), and who exhibit what Blackmore et al (2006) referred to as 'homosociability' (congruity between the values, philosophies and attitudes of leadership applicants and their selectors).

Despite the above research, occasions will inevitably arise whereby internal leadership candidates will be arguably selected over all external applicants on the basis of a seemingly fair and objective assessment of their experience and skills. Nevertheless, the central research question underpinning this investigation is: *Do NSWDE school principals favour their internal labour market when merit-selecting school leaders?* As such, it tests the credibility of a widely promoted merit-based narrative in a previously unexplored area of contemporary, leadership selection practice in NSW government schools.

What follows therefore is an outline of the key methodologies utilised in this study providing both interview and survey profiles of participating principals. Statistical analyses of 'teacher promotion' data published by the NSWDE over the decade 2006-2015 is also presented to reveal the extent to which school leaders were appointed by internal selection. Further, interview and survey responses are examined according to the two central themes that emerged from that data - namely principals' quest for selection certainty and the subjective nature of their recruitment practice. Finally, this study proffers a strategic framework that has the potential to both enhance the merit selection practice of NSWDE principals and improve school growth, innovation and student learning outcomes.

## Method

This study utilised semi-structured interviews, statistical analyses of published NSWDE teacher promotion data over a ten year period (NSWDE *Education Gazette*, 2006-2015), and a cross-sectional online survey (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2014) to explore the leadership selection practices of NSWDE principals and the degree to which internal selection was used in building school leadership cadres.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 primary and secondary school principals to gather data regarding their experiences, views, feelings and attitudes to the efficacy of the NSWDE's merit-based leadership selection process. Prior to conducting the interviews, an informal trial of the questions was undertaken with 3 randomly selected principals (unconnected with the principals interviewed for this study) to refine the phrasing and clarity.

The interviews identified a range of opinions held by NSWDE principals regarding merit selection practice that informed the design and execution of this study. The selection of principal interviewees was undertaken on the assumption that they operated in 'time-poor' contexts (Darmody & Smyth, 2016) and hence, would be a difficult 'population' to access. Qualitative sampling in the form of snowballing or chain referral (Gay et al, 2014; Layder, 2005) was therefore employed to select principals for recorded interviews.

This methodology expedited face-to-face access to school principals with the initial interviewee chosen arbitrarily from the NSWDE's Home Page hyperlink: 'Finding a Public School' (NSWDE, 2018) providing contact details for every government school in NSW. A meeting ensued to outline the aims of the study and obtain written consent for principal involvement - a process used consistently for all successive interviews.

After the initial interview, the respondent was asked to suggest an additional principal colleague who would be prepared to participate in the study. This 'snowballing' or referral technique was repeated in all subsequent interviews until the predetermined sample of 12 was achieved. Of the 12 principals interviewed, there were equal numbers of each 'self-identified' gender (6 male and 6 female) located in urban (n=7) and rural (n=5) schools.

Interview data was analysed via detailed coding of individual interview transcripts. These were typically complex and revealed a mix of contexts and ideas in any given response. Therefore, a multifaceted coding process was adopted to capture as much descriptive context as possible regarding NSWDE principals' attitudes to internal selection. This was achieved in the first instance by applying multiple codes to each 'meaning unit' (sentences and paragraphs) (Bazeley, 2013) and then undertaking extensive memo writing for every descriptive context and merit selection experience enunciated by principal interviewees. Whilst the initial interpretation of each meaning unit was coded tentatively, continual revision coupled with a sharpening and refinement of the codes, eventually led to a coding framework that could be accurately and readily applied to all principal commentary regarding their merit selection practice, disposition to internal selection of school leaders and the merit selection process per se.

Further, the interview process was also conducted with the dual purpose of drafting an online survey that would be employed in the second phase of this study in order to access a much larger sample of school principals across the state of NSW. The recurring themes and comments gleaned from the interviews provided an insight into the attitudes of principals to the NSWDE merit selection process and, in particular, their leadership selection practices. That qualitative data provided guidance as to the various areas of the principal-led merit selection practice that should be probed via the online survey as well as the style and structure of the resultant survey questions.

The completed survey comprised questions intended to elicit both qualitative and quantitative data. To ensure that the survey questions were unambiguous, an appraisal was undertaken by two university scholars and three experienced government school principals (excluded from the study) with a detailed knowledge of NSWDE merit selection procedures. These assessors advised on the clarity, validity and relevance of the draft survey in light of both NSWDE selection policies and/or their experience with the merit selection process.

A 'test-run' of the survey was undertaken by six randomly selected principal-volunteers to ensure that respondents would interpret the questions consistently. It was then launched online with an active 'response window' of 4 weeks and an automatic expiry date.

Principals were invited by email to complete the survey, having only to select an imbedded hyperlink for transfer to the *Qualtrics* survey site. The survey comprised option-button entry and open response questions designed to procure quantitative and qualitative data for analysis by *SPSS* and *NVivo* software. Further, recurring themes gleaned from qualitative responses were coded and assigned numeric values for further statistical analysis by *SPSS* software regarding principals' attitudes to the NSWDE merit selection process. Of the 2000 email invitations disseminated to government schools throughout NSW, 191 principals completed the survey yielding a response rate of approximately 10%.

Statistical analyses of 'Teacher Promotion' data were also extracted from the NSWDE's monthly *Education Gazette* over the decade 2006 to 2015 (NSWDE, 2006-2015). This analysis identified trends in leadership appointments and revealed whether the successful applicants were selected from an external (outside of the school) or internal (inside of the school) labour market.

## Profile of interview participants

The gender composition of the principal interviewees was equally weighted (see Table 1 and Appendix 1).

Table 1: Principal profile - interviews (N=12)

| Interview number | School type | Gender | Age band (years) | Principal experience (years) | School location |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Primary | Male | 60+ | 15 | Urban |
| 2 | Secondary | Male | 60+ | 8 | Rural |
| 3 | Primary | Female | 56-60 | 13 | Urban |
| 4 | Primary | Female | 46-55 | 10 | Rural |
| 5 | Secondary | Male | 46-55 | 10 | Urban |
| 6 | Secondary | Male | 46-55 | 7 | Rural |
| 7 | Secondary | Female | 46-55 | 1 | Urban |
| 8 | Secondary | Male | 46-55 | 10 | Rural |
| 9 | Secondary | Female | 46-55 | 4 | Urban |
| 10 | Primary | Female | 36-45 | 2 | Rural |
| 11 | Secondary | Female | 46-55 | 12 | Urban |
| 12 | Primary | Male | 36-45 | 4 | Urban |

Participants were generally experienced practitioners with the majority (n=8) having held their principalship for 7-15 years. Further, respondents were drawn from secondary (n=7) and primary schools (n=5) in both urban (n=7) and rural (n=5) locations thereby providing a comprehensive cross-sectional perspective on merit selection practice from a small, but demographically diverse range of principals. This study's classification of rural and urban schools mirrors the NSWDE's use of the *Australian Statistical Geography Standard* (NSWG, 2017; ABS, 2018) that categorises rural schools as those located in towns (with a core population of around 10,000) outside major metropolitan centres (e.g. Sydney) with their urban counterparts being city or metropolitan based. As such, this differential

informed the content, design and structure of the online survey utilised in the second phase of the study (see Appendix 2).

## Online survey participants

The statewide demographic characteristics of the survey-respondents are reported in Table 2. Notably, they are very similar in terms of age-band and geographical location to officially published NSWDE staffing data. This was further augmented by a reasonably balanced response pattern from both female and male principals.

Table 2: Principal profile - survey (%, N=191)

| | Sample | NSW | Sample | NSW | Sample | NSW | Sample | NSW | Sample | NSW |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Female | | Male | | | | | | | |
| | 54.7% | 74% ◊ | 45.3% | 26% ◊ | | | | | | |
| School location | Urban | | Rural | | | | | | | |
| | 65.6% | 72% ◊ | 34.4% | 28% ◊ | | | | | | |
| Years as a principal | 0-5 | | 6-10 | | 11-20 | | 20+ | | | |
| | 23.8% | | 32.8% | | 31.2% | | 12.2% | | | |
| Principal age band (years) | 25-35 | | 36-45 | | 46-55 | | 56-60 | | 60+ | |
| | 1.1% | 1.9% Δ | 15.3% | 17.7% Δ | 26.8% | 37% Δ | 34.2% | 28.3% Δ | 22.6% | 15% Δ |
| Years in teaching service | 0-10 | | 11-20 | | 21-30 | | 31+ | | | |
| | 1.6% | | 16.8% | | 30.5% | | 51.1% | | | |
| Selection panels convened | None | | 1-5 | | 6-10 | | 11-15 | | 16+ | |
| | 4.2% | | 26.3% | | 30.5% | | 19% | | 20% | |

◊ Source: NSW Department of Education: *The teaching workforce in NSW public schools 2015*
Δ Source: NSW Department of Education: *Permanent school teacher profiles September 2017*

## Published NSWDE documentation: *Education Gazette*

The *Education Gazette* was first published in June 1891 under the masthead *The NSW Educational Gazette* as the official record of the NSWDE (NSW State Archives, 2018). It publishes information pertaining to the appointment (including promotions and transfers), retirement and dismissal of teachers as well as distributing various curriculum (circulars and instructions) and school-specific material.

In order to sample trends in the appointment of NSWDE school leaders over a recent decade, promotion statistics were generated from the *Education Gazette* during the period 2006 to 2015. Each issue recorded the name of successful applicants, their former position, the school from which they originated and their subsequent school and leadership position. These were coded as either internal or an external appointments thereby allowing both monthly and yearly totals to be tallied providing a profile of all middle-level leadership positions filled.

The annual totals of middle-level internal and external leadership appointments made in NSWDE schools during the sample decade are presented in Table 3. In total, 5,817 middle-level school leaders were promoted via merit selection with 47% being internal appointments.

Table 3: NSWDE Middle-level teacher promotions 2006-2015 (excluding *principals)

| Year | Total promotions | Total internal appts | Total external appts |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2006 | 401 (*124) | 178 (*29) | 223 (*95) |
| 2007 | 766 (*199) | 325 (*54) | 441 (*145) |
| 2008 | 693 (*235) | 307 (*45) | 86 (*190) |
| 2009 | 459 (*407) | 225 (*151) | 234 (*256) |
| 2010 | 568 (*194) | 275 (*57) | 293 (*137) |
| 2011 | 315 (*116) | 145 (*49) | 170 (*67) |
| 2012 | 782 (*243) | 336 (*35) | 446 (*208) |
| 2013 | 386 (*202) | 230 (*11) | 156 (*191) |
| 2014 | 718 (*248) | 371 (*38) | 347 (*210) |
| 2015 | 729 (*208) | 327 (*54) | 402 (*154) |
| Ten year total | 5,817 (*2,176) | 2,719 (*523) | 3,098 (*1653) |
| Internal vs external promotion (%) | | 47% | 53% |
| Source: NSWDE *Education Gazette* 2006-2015 | | | |

This research sought to benchmark the 47:53 ratio (Table 3) against other school-based leadership recruitment regimes. To our knowledge, there are no similar studies that have systematically reviewed the ratio of internal/external recruitment across an entire educational jurisdiction. Hence, a frame of reference was pursued in the corporate domain, despite there being a clear differential in both purpose and values between the former (teaching and learning) and the latter (productivity and profit). Interestingly, it was found that whilst external leadership-hires generally exceeded internal promotions in both sectors (Bidwell & Keller, 2014; Chen, 2005; Murphy & Zabognik, 2007; 2004), the magnitude of school-based internal selection was considerably higher than the reported corporate rate of 8.0% (Jobvite, 2019).

The reasons for the disparity in rates of internal selection between school-based and corporate leadership appointments (Table 1) became apparent when both principal interview and survey data was analysed, revealing two distinct themes, namely the widespread utility of internal appointments by principals as a safeguard for leadership selection certainty, and the subjective nature of their school-based merit selection. These will now be discussed.

## Findings

### Theme 1: Internal selection as a safeguard for selection certainty

This theme emerged from responses to a closed survey question requiring principals to reflect upon their merit selection practice and indicate whether they believed it was advantageous to promote teachers from within their school. *SPSS* software was used to

generate a frequency table (Table 4) revealing 72% of participating principals selected *definitely yes* or *probably yes*.

Table 4: Principals' views on whether advantages
can be gained from internal selection

| Response | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| Definitely Yes | 41 | 23.4 |
| Probably Yes | 85 | 48.6 |
| Probably Not | 47 | 26.9 |
| Definitely Not | 2 | 1.1 |

n = 175 (16 non-attempts)

In order to further explore the above, an *open response* survey question was then used to elicit greater detail regarding why principals believed it advantageous to promote internally. The resulting qualitative data was coded and analysed according to the main recurring responses to reveal three leading response domains. The conversion of that qualitative data to numerical format facilitated *SPSS* analysis and generation of frequency profiles (see Table 5). Many principals indicated that an internal applicant's *knowledge of the school* was advantageous and expedited their transition into the leadership team; others maintained that the selection of new school leaders was *context-specific* and dependent upon whether a school's developmental trajectory was trending towards either stability or change; and finally, a smaller cohort believed little advantage accrued from internal promotion.

Table 5: Principals' responses to open survey question

| Reason | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| Knowledge of the school | 102 | 60.7 |
| Selection is context specific | 40 | 23.8 |
| No advantage | 26 | 15.5 |

n = 168 (23 non-attempts)

Interviews also revealed the existence of pre-determined in-school selection decisions and concurred with previously mentioned research regarding the promotion of known and trusted individuals. A principal interviewee reinforced this view:

> … if you've got people in your school going for the position, anyone who's been relieving in the position or is at the school has an advantage. They're always going to have an advantage because they know how the school runs, they understand the leadership team, they understand what's required of them. So they're always going to have an advantage over someone who's coming in cold. But if they've had an incumbent there and they're really happy, I think - and I mean this is my impression - that most people go for the person that we know rather than the one that you don't.

Survey respondents (henceforth designated as *principal response* [PR] preceding their *SPSS* data editor number) also expressed analogous views suggesting that selection panel conveners often had pre-determined the successful leadership applicant:

I have been on panels where the convener has their mind made up before the process begins, this becomes evident in the deliberations and their level of influence can be overpowering (PR#22).

Further, principals also conceded that internal applicants often occupied an advantageous position because they were 'known': 'Sometimes, knowing the community can be one of the vital qualifications' (PR #9). Indeed, the tendency for principals to merit-select the 'known' was reinforced when they were asked to explain if and why they considered it important for school leadership applicants to hold equivalent professional values and educational philosophies. Hence, when coded for *SPSS* frequency analysis it was apparent that the majority valued homogeneous leadership cadres (Table 6).

Table 6: Importance of school leadership applicants sharing
the same values and educational philosophy as selecting principals

| Response | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| Very important | 119 | 69.6 |
| Not important | 42 | 24.6 |
| Dependent upon school context | 9 | 5.3 |
| Unsure | 1 | 0.6 |

n = 171 (20 non-attempts)

It is apparent from the Table 6 data that the principals in this study placed a great deal of importance on the quest for 'selection certainty', when promoting school leaders to their leadership teams. Often this was achieved via internal selection with successful applicants being 'known' (best fit) and who also shared similar educational values and philosophies to those who selected them (homosociability). These attributes do not conform to the previously discussed meritocratic ideal but rather to the subjective nature of merit assessment that follows.

## Theme 2: The role of subjectivity in merit selection

Principals also acknowledged the role of subjective preference in their merit selection practice. Open-ended survey questions revealed the extent to which they considered non-merit variables influenced their leadership recruitment decisions. Whilst limited by the sample size (n=174), due to some principals not providing responses, the majority nevertheless indicated their merit-selection practice 'privileged' some individuals primarily because of subjective decision-making (see Table 7). This was especially true of those seeking to change the culture of their school by deliberately making disjunctive, as opposed to serial appointments (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Table 7: Merit selection and subjectivity/bias of principals in the study

| Merit selection for school leadership positions: | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| Privileges some applicants | 111 | 63.79 |
| Doesn't privilege applicants | 63 | 36.21 |

n = 174 (17 non-attempts)

Table 8 further reveals that 68.6% of principals found it difficult to exclude non-merit variables from their leadership selection deliberations. Indeed, the majority of respondents selected *probably not* or *definitely not* when asked to indicate whether it was possible to exclude non-merit variables from their recruitment decisions.

Table 8: Can non-merit variables be excluded from leadership recruitment?

| Response | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| Definitely Yes | 16 | 9.1 |
| Probably Yes | 39 | 22.3 |
| Probably Not | 95 | 54.3 |
| Definitely Not | 25 | 14.3 |

n = 175 (16 non-attempts)

Further, when principals' were asked to explain why they selected the options indicated in Table 8, three general response-types emerged for coding and SPSS analysis (Table 9).

Table 9: Reasons given by principals in selecting various options

| Response | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| Human nature is subjective | 103 | 67.8 |
| Merit selection can be objective | 48 | 31.6 |
| Unsure | 1 | 0.7 |

n = 152 (39 non-attempts)

Table 9 highlights the extent to which the principals in this study found it difficult to counteract the influence of non-merit variables when recruiting school leaders – a view further reinforced during the principal interviews. Moreover, principals were often clearly aware that they were not following correct merit selection policy when exercising their subjective intent. For example, a male primary school principal with 15 years experience suggested that:

> ... merit is connected with the local situation…. to be honest, it's a gut feeling of the person themselves. I know that's not kosher, but for me, sometimes just the way a person acts, the things they say …. and what they've said makes them feel that they're a good fit for our school.

Online survey responses also acknowledged the subjective influence of non-merit variables on principals' leadership recruitment decisions. One principal suggested: 'We have certain biases that we are sometimes not attuned to, i.e. dress, gender and experience' (PR#5). Another was of the view that: 'We are human and our initial impressions do have an affect [sic] on us even when we are aware of it' (PR#153). Similarly a principal argued: 'It is impossible to totally disregard non-merit factors completely – even if people feel they are doing so' (PR# 63).

For other principals, their own 'gut instinct' and the physical characteristics of leadership candidates was influential in their selection decisions. One principal indicated that: 'We

naturally make judgements of people based upon first impressions' (PR#146), whilst another believed that: 'Appearance is always a factor that affects how a candidate is viewed whether we like it or not' (PR#90).

Interestingly, some scholars in the field of cognitive neuroscience have found the use of heuristics (gut instinct/intuition) to be an accurate 'mental short cut' to resolve recruitment decisions (Miles & Sadler-Smith, 2014; Hodgkinson, Sadler-Smith, Burke, Claxton & Sparrow, 2009). Others however, report that subjective decisions based upon emotions/feelings are problematic (Dane, Rockmann & Pratt, 2012) because their accuracy depends upon a selector's experience (Rivera, 2015), and/or their desire to 'read' people whilst deliberately ignoring objective evidence (Highhouse, 2008). Indeed, a substantial percentage of principals in this study were not confident that merit could be measured objectively (Table 10).

Table 10: Can merit be measured objectively?

| Response | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 26 | 14.7 |
| Maybe | 54 | 30.5 |
| Unsure | 22 | 12.4 |
| No | 75 | 42.4 |

n = 177 (14 non-attempts)

A final concern expressed in survey data related to principal training (Table 11).

Table 11: NSWDE-initiated in-service hours
completed by principals regarding merit selection?

| Response | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| None | 27 | 15.4 |
| 1-2 hours | 71 | 40.6 |
| 3-4 hours | 40 | 22.9 |
| 5+ hours | 37 | 21.1 |

n = 175 (16 non-attempts)

The majority of the principals (40.6%) had participated in limited NSWDE-initiated training whilst 15.4% indicated that they had received none at all. Overall, 56% of respondents had received 2 hours (or less) merit-selection training, raising questions about the efficacy and objectivity of the current NSWDE merit selection paradigm.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our data suggest that despite the commonly accepted narrative of merit being a function of 'effort' and 'ability' (Littler, 2017; Young, 1958), non-merit variables often determined school-based leadership selection outcomes. Indeed, many principals in this study indicated an apparent reliance upon their 'internal labour market' (Buckman et al., 2018).

The leadership recruitment trends drawn from this data therefore reflects a pursuit of selection certainty by principals (Gronn & Lacey, 2006). There was also corroborating evidence of Blackmore et al.'s (2006) 'hidden rules' of merit selection, with 'known and trusted' internal applicants being appointed to leadership positions simply because they were 'well-placed' and possessed school-specific skills.

This study therefore accords with earlier research literature pertaining to the recruitment of principals, that selection panels, in the quest for selection certainty, tend to 'play it safe' and select 'one of their own' (Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Walker & Kwan, 2012). Of great interest therefore, was the replication of that same recruitment philosophy amongst the majority of the principals in this study. Interestingly, they demonstrated a similar subjective propensity to select middle-level school leaders who were both 'known quantities' and the 'best fit' for their school (Gronn & Lacey, 2006).

The major downside to a 'best fit' recruitment strategy is that it is essentially a subjective exercise that doesn't conform to the meritocratic ideal previously outlined. Whilst it provides short-term continuity, a homogeneous school leadership team will often struggle with educational change because it lacks experiential diversity (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Orton & Weick, 1990). Further, research data gleaned from 85 top-level school administrators throughout the US also demonstrated that subjective appointment on the basis of 'best fit' has often ensured that highly qualified school-leaders were frequently overlooked (Palmer et al., 2016). This tendency has serious long-term implications for the quality of instructional leadership and related student learning outcomes in NSWDE schools.

As previously discussed, relatively high levels of internal selection exist in NSW government schools. This is also potentially problematic, given that scholars have linked 'expert' educational leadership to school dynamism and enhanced student learning outcomes. Successful principals therefore realise that they cannot drive positive school change by themselves. Rather, they require the assistance of school leadership cadres comprised of innovative, risk-taking instructional educators working collaboratively to enhance the life-chances of their students. Hence, the selection of the 'known' has a tendency to preserve the status quo at the expense of school growth and/or innovation (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Orton & Weick, 1990).

The above trends also accord with the work of Thomas Greenfield, whose thesis was built on research that organisations such as schools were not natural entities regulated by physical laws, but rather social constructions created by the subjectivities (values and intentions) of humans. Hence, the merit selection of school leaders cannot be regarded exclusively as a 'value neutral' process. Indeed, his early work regarding subjectivism in educational administration (Greenfield, 1979) concluded that the selection process in schools was invariably influenced by the selectors' inherent subjectivity and that merit alone could not discriminate between two equally weighted candidates. Therefore, the merit selection of middle-level school leaders, as it currently operates in NSWDE schools, is not a completely neutral entity, but rather an amalgam of subjective and objective elements (Thornton, 2013).

This study has set out to investigate the merit selection practices of NSWDE school principals and the extent to which they engaged with the meritocratic ideal when recruiting deputy principals, assistant principals or head teachers as part of their school's leadership cadres. The results of that research have raised significant implications for principals' merit selection practices in NSW government schools.

Intuitively, what is most appealing about the meritocratic process is that those who are successful are generally regarded as being the most deserving (Simpson & Kumra, 2016), primarily because their talent and effort have been 'objectively' assessed to be superior to all applicants. However, the research data presented above suggests that this is not entirely the case in the selection of school leaders. Indeed, the principals who participated in this study have revealed that their departure from meritocratic selection practice and an acceptance of a degree of subjectivity in their leadership recruitment deliberations was appropriate for their schools and stakeholders, given the increased political and community-based demands they face to produce quality student learning outcomes.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper, the obvious implication is that further research is required into the NSWDE merit selection process with regard to developing a more objective leadership selection policy. One study that may assist that endeavour was trialled in Western Australia by Wildy, Pepper and Guanzhong (2011) in conjunction with the Western Australia Education Department. It utilised predetermined standards-based assessment criteria to 'rate' applicants' curriculum vitae, written referee reports and a performance-based task. The latter component, a departure from the norm, was used as a replacement for the traditional interview and referee telephone calls. As such, it required aspiring principals to complete a given task associated with an aspect of school leadership such as leading a staff meeting or dealing with a hypothetical critical incident. The elimination of candidate interviews and telephone calls to referees was found to markedly reduce the level of subjective selection practice (Wildy et al., 2011), whilst also providing recruiters with an insight into how prospective leadership candidates operated within a school setting. Interestingly, it should be noted that in contrast to NSW government schools, many independent schools in Australia currently incorporate performance-based tasks in their leadership recruitment regimes, often working with external recruitment firms (Morgan Consulting, n.d.; Randstad, n.d.) to head hunt and shortlist applicants.

This investigation also found that many principals readily acknowledged great value in the selection of individuals holding similar educational values and philosophical approaches to teaching – a selection approach that was often referred to by principals as the 'best fit' for their school. Whilst the logic behind the proposition of 'best fit' is perfectly understandable from a selecting-principal's perspective, it was found that almost half of the middle-level leadership appointments made in NSWDE government schools during the period of this study, privileged internal applicants.

As previously discussed, extensive reviews of research literature revealed little comparative school-based data regarding the point beyond which the extent of internal school leadership recruitment adversely impacted the integrity of the merit-selection process. Nevertheless, the incidence of internal selection in NSWDE schools was found to be

considerably higher than the corporate sector. Admittedly, they are two disparate cultures, however the findings of this study suggest that the preference of principals for internal candidates who were the 'best fit' greatly contributed to that differential.

The above trend has implications for future policy about the type of professional learning undertaken by NSWDE principals. It is has been well established by scholars that internal school leadership applicants benefit from customised professional learning and local knowledge that equip them to 'best fit' their school (Blackmore et al., 2006; Buckman et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2016). Therefore, NSWDE principals would benefit from a more nuanced, annual face-to-face in-service training program designed to enhance their identification of merit. A compliance regime such as this could be specifically tailored to equip principals with the requisite socio-metric skills to mitigate potential recruitment bias in the selection panel context, as well as enhancing their ability to objectively identify merit in potential middle level school leaders.

A hybrid-training model (Todd, Watts, Mulhearn, Torrence, Turner, Connelly & Mumford, 2017) comprising diversified modes of delivery has much to offer. Annual face-to-face training programs have an advantage over online platforms, primarily because they are not undertaken in isolation, but rather in an inclusive, collaborative setting, thereby enabling principals to interact with course facilitators and peers to share both their merit selection experience and expertise (Johnson, Aragon, Shaik & Palma-Rivas, 2000).

Finally, this study has revealed that the attitudes and dispositions of NSWDE principals may prove to be very difficult to eliminate entirely, given the external pressures imposed upon them to select what they 'perceive' to be the best leader for their school. Indeed, the data that has emerged from this investigation suggests that the premise of a fair and objective meritocratic selection process for school leaders in NSW government schools is at the very least, questionable.

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## Appendix 1: Semi-structured principal interview questions

(conducted March-April, 2017)



Faculty of Human Sciences
Department of Educational Studies
Macquarie University NSW 2109

**Principal Interview schedule**

Phone: +61 (02) 9850 7957

**Preliminary comments:**
- Thank you for volunteering your time to assist my research regarding the attitudes of principals to the operation of the merit selection process.
- The purpose of this interview is to sample principal attitudes to the merit selection as used for the recruitment of teachers into school-based leadership positions. *Your responses will inform the design of an online questionnaire which will be circulated to all principals via statewide email in the near future.*

- As a research participant, I would like to assure you that your confidentiality/identity will be protected and that your school name will not be disclosed in any research findings.
- Participation in his study is completely voluntary & you have the right to withdraw without reason from part, or all of this research, at any time.
- Any data that is published, shared or included in research data banks will be presented in a *non-identifiable* format.
- For the sake of time-efficiency and accuracy, I would like to record this interview - do you have any objection to this?

## Questions

1.  For how many years have you been employed in the NSWDE teaching service?
2.  How many years have you been a principal in NSW government schools?
3.  Approximately how many merit selection panels have you convened in your time as principal?
4.  In retrospect, have you found the merit selection process to be a reliable tool for the recruitment of executive teachers in your school(s)? Why?
5.  Do you enjoy convening merit selection panels? Why?
6.  The NSWDE selection process is based upon 'merit.' What do you understand by the notion of merit?
7.  Do you believe that "merit" can be measured objectively? Why?
8.  Do you believe that the current CV & interview mechanism for the recruitment of executive teaching staff provides for an effective assessment of merit? Why?
9.  Do you believe the current merit selection process can be improved? How & why?
10. As a Panel Convener, what do you consider to be the hallmark traits that identify 'merit' during the interview process?
11. Is there anything to be gained from the promotion of a job applicant to a leadership position (e.g. DP, AP or HT) from within the ranks of your current staff? Why?
12. Outline the disadvantages of promoting a job applicant from within the ranks of your current staff.
13. As a principal, would you say that it is safer to opt for the "known" (i.e. an internal applicant) as opposed to the "unknown" (i.e. an external applicant) when selecting an executive teacher for your school? Why?
14. To what extent do you believe that non-merit variables (eg an applicant's personality, knowledge of the school etc.), impact upon selection panel deliberations? Why?
15. How important is it that the candidate selected for a leadership position in your school share similar values, educational philosophy and attitudes to you? Why?
16. Based upon your past experience as a selection panel convener, do you believe it's possible to exclude non-merit variables from recruitment deliberations? Why?
17. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Thank you for your time.

## Appendix 2: Online principal survey

Conducted 7 May 7- 7 June, 2017)

Qualtrics.com. Initial Report, *Principal Survey*, 7 June 2017, 11:22 am AEST

**MACQUARIE University**

### Principal survey

Dear principal,

Thank you very much for volunteering to participate in this study. Your input will provide a valuable insight into the operation of principal-led merit selection panels convened for the recruitment of deputy principals, assistant principals and head teachers.

The following 28 question survey will take approximately 30 minutes to complete (please note the survey progress bar at the top of the page) with the majority of the questions requiring only a 'mouse click.' The remaining few extended response questions provide you with an opportunity to expand upon your views.

Finally, please bear in mind that:

- your participation in his study is completely voluntary
- you have the right to withdraw from part, or all of this research project at any time
- any data used for publication, will be in a non-identifiable format
- your personal identity and school's name will be withheld in confidence

Yours faithfully,

Kevin Steed.
Faculty of Human Sciences
Department of Educational Studies
Macquarie University

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Q1.    Do you consent to voluntarily participate in this research?
    o  Yes
    o  No

Q2.    Please indicate your gender:
    o  Male
    o  Female
    o  Transgender
    o  Non binary/gender fluid
    o  Prefer not to indicate

Q3.    Please indicate your age band
- 25-35 years
- 36-45 years
- 46-55 years
- 56-60 years
- 60+ years

Q4.    How long have you been employed in the NSWDE teaching service?
- 0-10 years
- 11-20 years
- 21-30 years
- 31+ years

Q5.    How long have you been a principal in NSW Government schools?
- 0-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-20 years
- 20+ years

Q6.    Approximately how many merit selection panels have you convened in your capacity as principal? (select one)
- None
- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16+

Q7.    My school is located in:
- a rural location
- an urban location

Q8.    The current merit selection process is a reliable school leadership recruitment tool?
- Very unreliable
- Unreliable
- Unsure
- Reliable
- Very reliable

Q8b.   Please explain why?

Q9.     Do you enjoy the role of panel convener in the merit selection process?
  o  Yes
  o  No

Q9b.    Why?

Q10.    How many NSWDE-initiated in-service hours have you completed in order to enhance your skills in merit selection?
  o  None
  o  1-2 hours
  o  3-4 hours
  o  5+ hours

Q11.    List between 3 and 5 words that you associate with the notion of 'merit.'

Q12.    The NSWDE's merit selection software is easy to use? (please select one)
  o  Very difficult
  o  Difficult
  o  Neutral (or neither difficult nor easy)
  o  Easy
  o  Very easy

Q13.    In percentage terms, how confident are you in using the NSWDE's merit selection software?

Q14.    The NSW DEC selection process is merit-based. Briefly explain what you understand by the notion of merit?

Q15.    In your opinion, can merit be 'measured' in a completely objective manner?
  o  Yes
  o  Maybe
  o  Unsure
  o  No

Q15b.   Why?

Q16.    Do you believe that the current interview mechanism for the recruitment of executive staff in NSWDE schools provides for an effective assessment of merit?
  o  Definitely yes
  o  Probably yes
  o  Probably not
  o  Definitely not

Q16b.   Why?

Q17.    Select the response that you consider best matches the statements in the left column:

Strong A= Strongly agree; A= Agree; Some A= Somewhat agree; N=Neither agree nor disagree; Some D=Somewhat disagree; D= Disagree; Strong D= Strongly disagree

| | Strong A | Agree | Some A | N | Some D | D | Strong D |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. The merit selection of school leaders is a time-efficient exercise | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| b. The current system for selecting school leaders is effective | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| c. The merit selection process always recruits the best school leaders | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| d. Merit selection is an equitable method for the recruitment of school leaders | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| e. The number of years an applicant has been teaching has no bearing on the recruitment of a school leader | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| f. Principals have been adequately trained to select school leaders on merit | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| g. Uniformity exists in the quality of the feedback provided by principals to unsuccessful job applicants | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| h. Too much emphasis is placed upon the interview in the current merit selection model | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| i. Too many young teachers are promoted before they have the requisite experience in a variety of schools | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

j. Referee reports are a critical determinant in the recruitment of educational leaders for your school

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

k. Principals should, at all times, be guided by the majority opinion of their panels in the selection of a new school leader

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

l. The Merit Selection process currently in use discourages teachers from applying for school leadership positions

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Q18.   In your view, the current school-based merit selection process:
- ○ privileges some applicants over others
- ○ does not privilege one applicant over another

Q19.   In your view, a job applicant's age:
- ○ has no bearing upon the merit selection of a school leader
- ○ can have an impact upon the merit selection of a school leader

Q20.   All individuals who comprise merit selection panels have the requisite skill and training to identify merit
- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

Q21.   It is difficult to exclude 'non-merit' variables (e.g. personality clothing/ attire/ voice tone) from the merit selection process:
- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

Q22.   In your view, selection panel decisions:
   o   Are not influenced by dominant personalities
   o   Can be influenced by dominant personalities

Q23.   In your view, are there advantages to be gained by promoting a candidate to a leadership position (DP, AP or HT) from within your current teaching staff?
   o   Definitely yes
   o   Probably yes
   o   Probably not
   o   Definitely not

Q23b.  Why?

Q24.   As a principal, would you say it is safer to opt for the 'known' (i.e. a current member of your staff) as opposed to the 'unknown' (i.e. an external applicant) when selecting a candidate for a leadership position in your school?
   o   Unknown
   o   Unsure
   o   Somewhat known
   o   Known

Q24b.  Why?

Q25.   To what extent do you believe that non-merit variables (e.g. an applicant's personality, knowledge of your school, age, gender, ethnicity etc.) are factored into selection panel deliberations? Why?

Q26.   How important is it that the candidate for a leadership position in your senior executive shares the same values, educational philosophy and attitudes to school culture as you? Why?

Q27.   Based upon your past experience as a selection panel convener, do you believe that it's possible to exclude non-merit variables from recruitment deliberations?
   o   Definitely yes
   o   Probably yes
   o   Probably not
   o   Definitely not

Q27b.  Why?

Q28.   Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the current NSWDE recruitment practice as it relates to the merit selection of deputy principals, assistant principals and head teachers in your school?

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