

## **Encouraging female teachers to become principals in Catholic composite secondary schools in WA**

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This study explored factors that encouraged female teachers to become principals in Catholic composite and secondary schools in Western Australia. Composite schools include both primary and secondary students. The study used a constructivist paradigm, specifically that of interpretivism and employed a symbolic interactionist perspective to explore participant experiences. The method for the study was an instrumental case study. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 female principals as well as the use of researcher field notes. The results indicate the importance of support from key administrators during their early years of teaching, particularly their principal and the influence of people such as colleagues or friends. Parents were a significant influence on the lives of the female participants and the way they valued themselves. The female principals were also motivated to undertake principalship by their passion for education and the desire to improve students' progress and learning.

### **Introduction**

Female principals exhibit a range of positive attributes when leading schools, such as creating a collaborative working environment (Funk & Polnik, 2005), promoting people-orientated capability, and enhancing social equity and fairness (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Female principals have the ability to support and empower others, (Zacharakis, 2017) and promote a commitment to building and sustaining professional relationships (Neidhart & Carlin, 2007). Female principals also tend to engage with the instructional leadership role more than male principals (Hallinger, 2011). However, the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) noted discrepancies in the number of female principals to male principals in international and national educational settings (OECD, 2020). When our study was undertaken, for example, there were 18 female and 25 male principals in the Catholic sector in Western Australia (CEWA, 2020). There are a range of factors which influence female teachers to aspire to leadership positions, particularly that of the principal. As part of a larger qualitative study (Outtrim, 2019), this paper will describe the factors that influenced female teachers to become principals in Catholic composite and secondary schools in Western Australia (CCSS). The research will provide insight into what encouraged female principals to aspire to leadership and will contribute further knowledge to the literature.

## Background

There are various factors identified in the literature that encourage women to take leadership positions. These factors include direct encouragement from a mentor or friend, family attitudes, a passion for education and a commitment to making a difference in the lives of students in their schools, and the women's financial background. The most powerful factor that enables women to develop voice, influence and opt for leadership is being 'tapped on the shoulder' or directly encouraged to pursue leadership. That is, a friend or mentor who encourages the female by communicating a strong message that she is talented and who are supportive of her to 'just do it' (Bay, 2020). In her research, Mochizuki (2014) highlighted the importance of key administrators who saw potential in females or had offered or pushed them into leadership. She also noted the positive influence of other people such as colleagues or friends. Such influence was important to female aspirants, as these people had instilled positive values that shaped their leadership ideals.

A second important factor for women is the positive attitude of parents and partners who can provide much-needed support, for example, when fathers encourage their daughters to speak up or women whose husbands share the household duties (O'Neil & Domingo, 2016). Bay (2020) observed that women and young girls who are encouraged by family members are more likely to consider leadership. Piterman (2008) noted that many attributes of women's leadership successes are due to the influence of significant family members and social background. Hence as a woman matures, her family attitudes and social environment make a significant difference in her leadership abilities. In a study by Sayce and Lavery (2017), female principals noted that they were appreciative of their husbands' encouragement, particularly on a challenging day. These female principals defined their interaction and support from their husbands as a team effort.

Thirdly, the literature highlighted that women are motivated to undertake the principalship through a passion for education and a commitment to make a difference in the lives of their students. Female principals are strongly motivated by their love and devotion towards students and education, with an emphasis on students' progress and learning results (Avgeri, 2015; Murakami & Tornsen, 2017). Further, Shaked et al. (2018) noted that a female principal's passion and commitment to education enhanced partnerships, empowered others, delivered effective leadership practices, and increased the possibility of having a positive influence on student outcomes.

Lastly, financial security and stability are factors that can encourage and provide opportunities for women to seek leadership positions. In some Asian cultures, for example, being brought up in a privileged environment is a likely motivational factor or reason to pursue a leadership role in education. Elite women or women with secure financial backgrounds are most able to take advantage of leadership opportunities (O'Neil & Domingo, 2016).

## **Purpose and research question**

The purpose of this research was to explore the personal and professional experiences of female principals in Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA) composite and secondary schools (CCSS) as to those factors that encouraged women teachers to become principals. The intention was to acquire an understanding of those factors which positively impact on women teachers to take on the principalship. In the light of the purpose and the literature review, there was one primary research question: What factors encourage women teachers to become principals in CEWA composite and secondary schools?

## **Context**

This research was undertaken within a specific context in Western Australia and Catholic schools in that state. The Bishops of Western Australia combined Catholic schools across their four Dioceses (Perth, Broome, Geraldton and Bunbury) into one state-wide system in 1971, with the establishment of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA) (CEWA, 2020). As a state-wide system, CEWA oversees education for the four dioceses, managing 162 schools and with more than 76,000 students (CEWA, 2020). CEWA is the second largest education provider in Western Australia (CEWA, 2020). The system employs 6,200 teachers and 4,800 non-teaching staff (CEWA, 2020).

## **Significance**

The significance of this research is that women are under-represented in principal roles. It is important to explore the personal and professional experiences of female principals in CCSS as a means to gain an insight into what motivates women to undertake the principalship. Identifying and understanding such motivation may highlight appropriate measures to encourage more women teachers to undertake a principalship.

## **Research design**

The theoretical perspective adopted for this research is interpretivism. Interpretivism is defined as “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67) and is associated with a constructivist epistemology. By collating the data from the female principals’ responses, it will be possible to interpret and analyse factors that encourage women teachers to become leaders in CEWA composite and secondary schools. The methodology used for this research was a case study. Punch (2003) stated that researchers using a case study approach gather evidence from multiple sources in an effort “to understand the case in-depth, and in its natural setting, recognizing complexity and its context” (p. 144). The particular form of case study was instrumental (Yin, 2009). In an instrumental case study, the case itself is secondary to understanding a particular phenomenon (Stake, 2003), which in this situation was aimed to provide insight into specific factors that encourage women teachers to become principals in CCSS.

## Participants

The research participants in this study were 14 CCSS female principals who held principalships in a range of CEWA coeducational and single gender composite and secondary schools. Four were principals with less than two years' experience, three participants had three to six years of experience in the principalship role, and seven participants had seven or more years of experience as principals. The majority of participants were married and most had children. Ten of the participants were in their first principalship and four had been principals in two Catholic composite or secondary schools. Two participants had been former primary school principals, before taking the role of principal at a composite school. At the time of study there were 18 CEWA female principals. All 18 female principals were invited to take part in the study, 14 of whom consented to be a part of the research.

## Data collection

Methods of data collection included in-depth, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews, and researcher-generated field notes. A semi-structured one-to-one interview of approximately one hour was undertaken with each of the female principals. Interview guide questions were used as the basis for the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by an external contractor. Field notes were generated and used to describe the physical setting and the communication patterns, both verbal and non-verbal, of participants in the semi-structured interviews. Field notes were taken during and after the interviews. During the interview a record was kept of key comments that were made and any non-verbal communications such as body language and tone of voice. This process offered additional information to participants' verbal responses.

## Data analysis

The process of analysing qualitative data involves coding and categorising in order to extract meaning of the phenomenon. This analysis is based on the *interactive cycle process* (Miles et al., 2020) and was used with the data collected from semi-structured one-to-one interviews. It entails data condensation, data display, and verification and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2020).

## Results

The study identified four themes that have encouraged these female teachers to become principals in Catholic composite and secondary schools. These themes were: direct encouragement from significant people; opportunities to undertake acting principalship roles; encouragement from family members and family role models; and a passion for education and commitment to making a difference for students.

### **Direct encouragement from significant people**

Many participants mentioned the importance of support from key educational administrators. Specifically, these participants highlighted the support of their principal and colleagues in their journey to becoming a principal. For example, one participant noted, “my former principal certainly encouraged me.” A second participant identified that her former principal’s support and trust to take charge was an important element. She commented, “He [principal] was really encouraging, he gave me a free reign to do what I wanted to do within teaching and learning”. A third participant noted, “For me it was working with my principal who just gave me a lot of autonomy, a lot of responsibility and a lot of trust”. This participant remarked further, “I’d come to my principal with ideas to implement an initiative, and the principal was always supportive of having a go and it is through that you then develop the respect of the staff.” A fourth participant indicated, “The principal came in and said to me, you need to start applying [for principalship]”.

Some participants had been encouraged to take on the principalship whilst they were in the role of deputy principal. One participant acknowledged, “I was a young deputy principal, my leaders were very supportive and encouraging of me to take the next step.” A second participant expressed her experience in working with a principal who was a Christian Brother. She commented, “He encouraged people, encouraged the young ones in those days. He mentored people; he saw the need to give other people opportunities”. This participant believed that this principal encouraged people to move on to other leadership roles. As she noted, “I’ve known a number of people who have done leadership renewals now who would readily acknowledge this [Christian] Brother as a great mentor”.

Various participants identified that various members of the religious order of the Sisters of Mercy played a part in influencing and supporting their leadership journey. In particular, these participants highlighted the support and guidance of the Mercy Sisters as female principals who dutifully looked after women in need. One participant commented, “The Mercy Sisters brought a strong sense of collegiality and leadership”. She noted further, “The Mercy Sisters, they’ve been supporting principals, and they’ve looked at support like a wellbeing allowance and professional coaching”. A second participant noted, “I think the Mercy Sisters have a great affection for me because I know the history and I’ve lived the history”. Reinforcing the impact of the Mercy Sisters’ influence on her leadership journey, the same participant added, “The Mercy Sisters also felt very strongly that they were all women; they were all leaders. They looked after women in need”. A third participant indicated her sense of belonging and acceptance with the Mercy Sisters, “There was a sense of connection for me in the community and certainly with the Sisters and the Mercy heritage.”

Some participants commented on the encouragement they received from people around them, those they referred to as ‘colleagues’. One participant noted the impact of encouragement from colleagues with whom she worked closely. As she noted, “People [colleagues] would reach out and say, why don’t you give this a go? And eventually I just did that until I became deputy principal”. A second participant remarked, “It wasn’t till I came to my current school, which was then a brand-new school, and people (colleagues)

would say, give it (principalship) a go.” A third participant noted, “I think it was most likely that people around you encouraged you”. A fourth participant remarked, “I had some strong feedback from teachers I worked with, they would often make comments saying that they felt I would make a good principal”.

Several participants noted the importance of encouragement and recognition provided by CEWA personnel in their journey to becoming a principal. School Improvement Advisors [SIAs], for example, provide support to their designated secondary schools where often a professional relationship with the leadership team is developed. Whilst working with her SIA, one participant commented, “He [SIA] said it [principalship] can be done, you’re sort of the right person for the job”. Reflecting on these words, this participant noted, “I’ve got nothing to lose by having a go”. A second participant remarked, “The factor that motivated or encouraged me was that I was part of the aspiring leadership program and was encouraged by a School Improvement Advisor”. She noted further, “He said use the formation as leadership growth”. A third participant stated, “I had my SIA as a mentor, and he said some really wise things to me. You want a school board that's going to be collaborative and supportive. That is something that really stuck with me”. A fourth participant remarked, “The Deputy Executive Director was at that time in the same leadership group as me... I think that [support] was really powerful”. A fifth participant stated, “A job was advertised at a school in the Kimberley region, but it was the executive director at that time who supported me to take on the position”.

### **Opportunities to undertake acting principal roles**

The data presented in this theme describes the positive influence associated with opportunities to undertake acting principalship roles. For many of the participants, the opportunity to take on the role of acting principal was an incentive to become a principal in a CEWA secondary and composite school. One participant remarked, “I did the acting role quite early on because of principal’s personal circumstances. Whilst I found the experience really challenging, I did like the opportunity to steer the ship even in acting capacity”. This participant commented further, “In the acting role, there was no expectation to make major changes, as the role was primarily a caretaker role”. A second participant noted, “The opportunity to substitute for an absent principal was enough to encourage me to consider the next move”. A third participant, who also had an opportunity to substitute for an absent principal stated, “There was enough of a taste of it [principalship] for me to think, I would actually quite like to do this”. She commented further, “So, it was that experience more than anything that made me to at least consider it [principalship]”.

For one participant the opportunity to take on the role of acting principal occurred whilst relieving for a principal who was ill. This participant remarked, “When the principal got very ill... I was the principal, that’s what happened. I entered untrained and because I was untrained, I co-worked with another (to gain the principal experience)”. A second participant who gained an opportunity to take on the role in light of an ill principal noted, “The principal I was working with was very sick with a lot of mental issues, so pastorally you just step in, things had to be done, the school had to run”.

Some participants noted that they were able to do the role once they had the opportunity to step into the position of principal. One participant realised that she was able to improvise and do the role when she remarked, "Due to the principal's detriment, I started to realise I had some potential because of the gains I was making with staff and students; thus, that was the start to realise I was capable". A second participant who was invited by her principal to co-share responsibilities mentioned, "Co-working with my principal was an opportunity to gain first-hand experience, it worked favourably for me in expanding my knowledge in leadership of secondary schools". She remarked further, "I was getting a strong picture of what the secondary network system looked like, and I said I can really do this".

### **Family members and family traditional links to leadership**

The data presented in this theme are divided into two categories: encouragement from family members, and a family tradition of strong leaders. Most participants mentioned that their families had encouraged them to take on the role as principal of a CEWA secondary school. In particular, married participants described the key role their husbands played in encouraging them in their leadership journey. Two participants even commented that their husbands stayed at home. For example, one participant stated, "My husband was very good, and obviously I couldn't have done it without his encouragement". A second participant commented, "My husband is very supportive, he very much believes in me and my ability to do the role". A third participant remarked, "My husband is a very supportive person, who guided, supported me and encouraged me to go on and become a principal." This participant added, "It is great to have someone at home, a partner who supports you in your leadership work".

A few participants indicated that they were motivated and influenced by strong leaders within their own families. For example, one participant observed, "My motivation really lies in the tradition of my family. I have my grandma who was the principal of a Catholic school in England". This participant remarked further, "My auntie was a principal at St. Agnes in England and another auntie actually ran a special education school, thus the tradition [of leaders in education] carried on." A second participant indicated that her confidence to lead and become a principal was mainly due to her resilient upbringing and her father's influence. She commented on her father as a strong leader, "I grew up with a can-do [anything is possible] attitude because of my father". She remarked further, "I was strongly influenced by my siblings... I have a sister, she's a Franciscan missionary nun who is head of her congregation". A third participant noted, "My husband has been in education and was an educational leader himself. He understood me and we've been in education a lot and I have three children who work in Catholic schools". She added, "They also understand that you know there are career paths".

### **Commitment to making a difference in the lives of students in their school**

Many participants indicated that part of their motivation to become a principal was a desire to make a difference in the lives of their students. In particular, participants had a sincere desire to help their students improve academic results as well as their well-being.

For example, one participant noted, “I’ve been in teaching now for many years and right from when I started, I loved being in the classroom, but I felt that I could really make a difference in leadership roles”. She added, “I just really enjoy teaching and making a difference for my students.” A second participant remarked, “What motivates me is to make a difference for our students, to provide the very best opportunities for them [students] and encourage staff to grow these skills to be able to make that happen”. A third participant indicated, “I thrived on feeling like I make a difference to the kids [students]. That's the big thing that drives me.” A fourth participant noted, “When I am making a difference to the students’ [learning and achievement outcomes], this gives me energy, it energises me”.

Various participants also expressed that their motivation to become principals came from their passion for education and commitment to engaging with students. Many of these participants indicated that they were energised by their interaction with children and passion for teaching. For example, one participant commented, “I really enjoyed working with children and I found that the kids responded to me, so I actually developed good relationships that really encouraged me [to become a principal]. That's why I applied for this job [principalship].” A second participant noted, “I have always been passionate about working with young people and trying to ensure that they are engaged in schooling. I have “I have a passion for education and especially, a passion for girls’ education. I think I’m very dedicated to my role and I really want to lead with the best outcome from everything that we do”.

## Discussion

The discussion is divided into four themes: direct encouragement from significant people; opportunities to undertake acting principalship roles; encouragement from family members and family role models; and a passion for education and a commitment to making a difference for students. Each of these themes is now considered in light of the literature pertaining to the encouragement of women in leadership.

Participants were able to provide insight regarding significant people who encouraged them to become principals. In particular, participants highlighted the importance of direct encouragement from former principals, members of religious orders, CEWA personnel and colleagues. Participants commented on the critical support of former principals who provided them with leadership opportunities and responsibilities. This support was particularly evident during the role of deputy principal, which gave participants confidence to consider a principal’s position. A small number of these former principals were members of the Sisters of Mercy and a Christian Brother. All were considered crucial in influencing and supporting the participants in their leadership journey. Such an experience accords with the views of Mochizuki (2014) who stated that the notion of principals seeing potential in women is evident where principals offer women leadership opportunities and encourage them to take on responsibilities.



Some participants remarked that the Sisters of Mercy had a strong sense of collegiality and leadership. These participants noted that the Sisters were important for promoting strong female leaders. Above all, these participants highlighted that the Sisters were recognised for supporting teachers and leaders in the area of wellbeing and providing professional coaching. The support of and dependence on key people is integral for females to fulfil the role of principal (Hansen, 2014).

Participants noted that CEWA personnel such as the School Improvement Advisors (SIAs) were important for encouragement, recognition and mentorship. The SIAs not only encouraged participants to become principals but were at times, supportive mentors whilst in their leadership positions. Women in leadership who feel they are not confident about their leadership abilities need supportive mentorship from key influential individuals (Barber, 2013).

Various participants commented on the encouragement received from colleagues. The influence of colleagues was instrumental in helping participants develop a self-belief that they were able to progress to the next step of their professional leadership journey. Certain participants identified that the most powerful influence can come from those with whom they work most closely, who recognise their talent and encourage them. The participants' experiences were reflected in the literature which identified colleagues or mentors who encouraged females by acknowledging their abilities and communicating a strong message that they are talented (Bay, 2020; Mochizuki, 2014).

A number of the participants commented very favourably on the opportunity to undertake acting principalship roles, which were instrumental in setting them on the path to principalship. Participants noted the challenging aspects of an acting principalship. However, they believed the experience gave them an insight into the nature of the role and helped to build in them a sense of confidence, which enabled them to progress to the next step of their professional leadership journey. In particular, the experience provided participants with a realisation that they had the potential to take on the principalship role.

For all the importance that some participants placed on the value of an acting principalship, there appears to be little literature that explicitly links the notion of an acting principalship role as a means of encouraging women to become secondary school principals in Australia. There is limited literature on models such as co-principalship (Marks, 2013) or acting principalship in general (Cannon, 2004). This paucity of literature is concerning given the emphasis placed on this experience by the participants. Aspiring female secondary principals should be given leadership opportunities and also have an opportunity to act in the principalship role, as it may provide them with valuable skills to refer them for the role.

Several participants specifically commented on the importance of family members in terms of encouraging them to become principals. In particular, participants who were married emphasised that their husbands were supportive of the leadership work and were their main source of encouragement, especially those husbands who stayed at home.

These participants commented that they could not have done their role without their husbands' encouragement.

There is evidence in the literature of the importance of a partner's support. O'Neil and Domingo (2016), for example, noted that partners provided much needed support and had a significant influence on the lives of women in leadership roles and the way they valued themselves, and attained their beliefs which ultimately made them successful in their career. Sayce and Lavery (2017) noted that female principals appreciated their husbands' encouragement where both partners shared the responsibility of domestic work, which was seen as a team effort. This situation was particularly the case for the female principals on a challenging school day (Sayce & Lavery, 2017).

Some participants were encouraged to take on leadership positions through female and male family role models such as grandmothers and aunts, who were themselves school principals, and a father who had instilled a positive attitude for leadership. These particular family members had an understanding of the nature of the leadership role, responsibility, time commitment and provided the participants with the encouragement needed to pursue the principalship role. Women's leadership successes can be due to the influence of significant family members and social background (Piterman, 2008). That is, family attitudes and social environment can be key to women's leadership aspirations, from childhood through adolescence to adulthood (Piterman, 2008). Only one participant, however, commented on the importance of a parent, who in her case was her father. This fact was a little surprising given that the literature acknowledges the significant importance of both parents as having an influence on the lives of women, specifically in the way they value themselves and attain their beliefs (Bay, 2020; Fennell, 2008; Mochizuki, 2014).

In some cultures, being brought up in a privileged environment, elite women or women with secure financial backgrounds are most able to take advantage of leadership opportunities (O'Neil & Domingo, 2016). Women's choices with regard to leadership opportunities could be influenced or constrained by factors such as the social class and educational backgrounds of parents (Fennell, 2008). Financial and cultural background was not mentioned by participants, possibly because they all originated from white, middle-class backgrounds. There was limited cultural and socio-economic diversity within the participants, which may require addressing by educational sectors in future.

An important contributing factor for participants becoming secondary principals was a passion for education and a commitment to making a difference for students in their school. Participants noted that their passion for education was manifested by leading improvement and change in education and driven by a sincere desire to improve academic results as well as the well-being of all students. The participants' responses resonated strongly with the literature, whereby it was highlighted that a female principal's prime motivation was her love and devotion towards students and education, with an emphasis on students' progress and learning results (Avgeri, 2015; Murakami & Tornsen, 2017). Further, Shaked et al. (2018) noted that a female principal's passion and commitment to education enhanced partnerships, empowered others, delivered effective leadership practices, and increased the possibility of having a positive influence on student outcomes.

Participants commented that they were passionate about education and were committed to engaging with students, lifelong education and learning and working with staff in a collaborative manner, in order to improve students' performance. Participants expressly indicated that their leadership approaches were servant, instructional and transformational (Zacharakis, 2017). Participants remarked that they have strong nurturing and caring qualities. In this respect, Cummings (2005) stated that women take on a more interpersonal style of leadership and tend to be more efficient and better at problem solving than men. Appelbaum et al. (2003) noted that female leaders had strong communication skills, the ability to be good listeners, demonstrated empathy, had good negotiation and conflict resolution skills, and had sound interpersonal skills. Participants also believed that the emotional intelligence of women is stronger than men. However, this belief does stand in contrast to research by Fischer et al. (2018), whose study of more than 5000 participants found no gender differences in a range of target emotions to various stimuli.

Participants remarked that as female principals, they felt they are better at seeing the individual and being sympathetic of others. Participants also added that they are driven to transform schools by their interpersonal and emotional skills. There is evidence in the literature which noted that women are more transformational than men (Munir & Aboidullah, 2018). In terms of leadership styles, female leadership strongly aligns with a transformational leadership style which emphasises leaders' ability to guide, inspire, stimulate, motivate and support their followers (Sebastian & Moon, 2018). Women excel at particular elements of transformational leadership such as the development of others, inspiration and motivation, relationship building, collaboration and teamwork (Zacharakis, 2017).

Participants emphasised that as instructional leaders, they were aware of how to make changes in education and get the best out of their students. Costello (2015) noted that instructional leadership is effective when principals interact and recognise the expertise of other educators and work collaboratively in order to encourage shared responsibility by inviting staff to share resources, materials and ideas at staff meetings. Participants commented that as principals they were driven by their desire to work with staff and young people, ensure that their students are engaged at school and instructing students as the future of the country.

### **Limitations**

A potential limitation of this study is that of generalisability. The study was confined to fourteen female principals in Catholic composite and secondary schools in Western Australia. It did not include contributions from female principals in Western Australian Independent and Government composite and secondary schools. However, this study provides a descriptively rich account of the participants' experiences, which allows readers to make their own judgments as to the relevance of the study to their own context.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The key factors that encouraged female teachers to become principals in Catholic secondary and composite schools in Western Australia were: direct encouragement from key administrators and colleagues; opportunities to undertake acting principal roles; family members and family tradition of strong leaders; and commitment to making a difference in the lives of students in their school. The participants interviewed were encouraged, supported, and guided by educational administrators, such as former principals, the Mercy Sisters, and CEWA personnel to take the next step into educational leadership. In short, participants felt that this encouragement had built their confidence and enthusiasm to take on the next step to principalship. Additionally, many participants indicated that they were encouraged by colleagues to take on the role of principalship. The opportunity to undertake acting principal roles was key for giving them an initial experience into the life of a principal, and hence developing a self-belief that they are able to progress to the next step of their professional leadership journey.

Participants' families encouraged them to become principals and were generally understanding of the nature of the role's responsibility and time commitment. This encouragement and support was seen as significant for the female principal as she navigated between her personal and principal roles. Other participants indicated that their motivation was influenced by strong leaders within their own families. Encouragement came from a history of strong female educators. Leadership examples included both female and male role models such as, grandmothers and aunts who were themselves school principals and a father who had instilled a positive attitude in a particular participant.

Female principals were committed to making a difference for students in their school and demonstrated a passion for education. This passion was manifested by leading improvement and change for all students. The notion of being present and engaging with students within their schools was energising for female principals.

This study added knowledge to the field in one way. Participants commented very favourably on the opportunity to undertake acting principalship roles, which were instrumental in setting them on the path to principalship. This experience gave the participants an insight into the nature of the role and helped to build in them a sense of confidence, which enabled them to progress to the next step of their professional leadership journey. In particular, the experience provided participants with a realisation that they had the potential to take on the principalship role. For all the importance that some participants placed on the value of an acting principalship, there appears to be little literature that explicitly links the notion of an acting principalship role as a means of encouraging women to become secondary school principals in Australia. There is limited literature on models such as co-principalship (Marks, 2013) or acting principalship in general (Cannon, 2004).

In the light of this study, three recommendations are made to the system authority, CEWA, to prioritise and promote the recognition of female principals and leaders. These recommendations may also apply to other educational sectors within Western Australia and nationally. Firstly, female principals should be given more recognition for their contributions as principals to Catholic composite and secondary schools. Elevating the contributions made by many past and current female principals and leaders could support and encourage more female teachers to become future principals in Catholic composite and secondary schools.

Secondly, CEWA should be proactive in seeking out and supporting female teachers to undertake the principalship to increase the recruitment of female principals in Catholic composite and secondary schools. Proactive recruitment is necessary as female teachers may not voluntarily seek out the role.

Thirdly, it is recommended that CEWA provides a leadership framework specifically for female teachers, which recognises the value and effectiveness of the characteristics of female leaders. All female leaders in Catholic composite and secondary schools should be encouraged to contribute strategically, in order to improve the representation of female leadership in Catholic composite and secondary schools.

### **Contributions of the research**

This study provides a basis for extended or further research in the personal and professional experiences of female principals in other national Catholic, Government and Independent composite and secondary schools. There are benefits to be gained from extending the study across other states and territories, to contrast and compare experiences of Catholic female principals across Australia. The results of international research would enhance global conversations about female secondary school principals' professional identities, equity issues in leadership, why female principals in Catholic secondary schools are under-represented and factors that encourage and motivate female teachers to apply for principalship positions.

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