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Principals' Beliefs: The Interface of Gender and Sector

This article reports on a broad scale study of a balanced sample of male and female principals in Australia. It used questionnaire, interview, and historical data to explore the relationships between the perceptions and beliefs of principals, their gender, and other key contextual factors. Earlier claims that there are important and frequently overlooked differences in the cognitive frameworks of male and female leaders are confirmed. However, essentialist stereotypes are challenged by findings that factors such as level of schooling, institutional scale, and students' gender interact with and modify gender predispositions. Sectorial identity was found to be one of the most powerful sources of differences.¹ The findings call for sophisticated theoretical perspectives that acknowledge the interactive nature of principals' gender and organizational context.

Cet article présente une étude à grande échelle portant sur un échantillon équilibré de directeurs et de directrices d'école en Australie. S'appuyant sur des questionnaires, des entrevues et des données historiques, l'auteur s'est penché sur le rapport entre les perceptions et les croyances des directeurs et des directrices, leur sexe et d'autres facteurs contextuels importants. Les résultats confirment les conclusions antérieures selon lesquelles il existe des différences importantes et souvent négligées entre les cadres cognitifs des dirigeants et ceux des dirigeantes. Toutefois, l'étude remet en question les stéréotypes en soulignant que certains facteurs tels le niveau de scolarité, la taille des institutions et le sexe des élèves interagissent avec les prédispositions dictées par le sexe et peuvent même les modifier. L'identité sectorielle s'est avérée être une des sources les plus importantes des différences. Les résultats révèlent le besoin de perspectives théoriques sophistiquées qui admettraient le lien interactif du sexe des directeurs d'écoles et du contexte organisationnel.

Gender Patterns in School Leadership

Australia replicates the pattern of advanced western democracies where schools are highly feminized workplaces, but men hold disproportionate percentages of principalships.² This mirrors broader patterns in the Australian workforce where men hold 80% of administrative, executive, and managerial jobs, but occupy only 28% of clerical positions (Connell, 1987). In the 1996 Census, 73% of those who classified themselves as "managers and administrators" were men. It also indicated that although 69% of teachers in Australia were women, only a third of school principals in Australia were female (ABS Census, 1998). In the state of Victoria, where this study was conducted, the proportions in principalships conformed to the national pattern: men 67%, women 33%. It would seem that observations about Canadian and English schools as institutions where "men manage and women teach" are equally applicable to Australia (Ozga, 1993; Reynolds, 1995).

Explanations for the low proportions of women in the principalship in western democracies include cultural and historical theses that argue that it reflects traditional gender roles that sanction teaching as an appropriate sphere for women but precludes them from school leadership (Reynolds, 1995). Other

theorists have argued that men dominate the principalship because of patriarchal traditions of public leadership (Hearn, 1993; Seidler, 1994). Feminist critiques have defined educational administration as “gender blind” and a “masculinist enterprise” that consistently marginalize women (Blackmore, 1993, 1999; Marshall & Rusch, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1987, 1989). Nurturant paradigms are also accused of restricting female teachers to the “domestic hearth of the classroom” or to roles as “emotional laborers” who manage human issues that male principals and system bureaucrats eschew (Blackmore, 1993; Reynolds, 1995). Other explanations related to their career choices and reluctance to apply for leadership positions frequently claim that they are restricted to roles in schools that are compatible with their other life-roles as wives and nurturers (Acker, 1989; Antonucci, 1980; Darley & Lomax, 1995). It is usually assumed that men are not inhibited by similar restraints. Organizational theorists have pointed to the cultures and structures of the workplace as forces that systematically discriminate against and marginalize women from promotional tracks whereas male networks favor men (Connell, 1987; Kanter, 1977; Russell, 1995). The culture of educational administration itself, especially the limited nature and sexist assumptions that infuse the dominant journals and university coursework, has also been identified as a contributing factor (Marshall & Rusch, 1995).

There is evidence of essentialism and typecasting in much early leadership discourse. It is frequently assumed that all-pervasive differences exist between men and women. Unitary stereotypes depict men as “directive, bureaucratic and instrumental” and women as “collaborative, relational and organic” (Adler, Laney, & Packer, 1993; Ferguson, 1984). Gilligan’s (1982) research, which concluded that men operate from a values base of “abstract principle” and women from a “relational focus” when confronting intensely personal issues like abortion, is assumed to apply to other decision-making realms such as school leadership. Gray’s (1989) gender paradigms in schools are a classic example of such typologies. He drew on the early work of Bem (1974) and linked a feminine paradigm to primary schools and the masculine with secondary schools (Figure 1).

The field of gender studies itself has moved beyond essentialist typecasting in recent years and developed more fine-tuned theories based on the interactions of both sexes with specific and diverse social contexts. Connell’s (1995) concept of “multiple forms of masculinity and femininity” reflects this increased sophistication. He argues that various socioeconomic cultures generate

<i>Nurturant/feminine paradigm</i>	<i>Masculine/aggressive paradigm</i>
Caring	Highly regulated
Creative	Conformist
Intuitive	Disciplined
Aware of individual differences	Normative
Noncompetitive	Competitive
Tolerant	Evaluative
Subjective	Objective

Figure 1. Gray’s gender paradigms in schools (1989, p. 111).

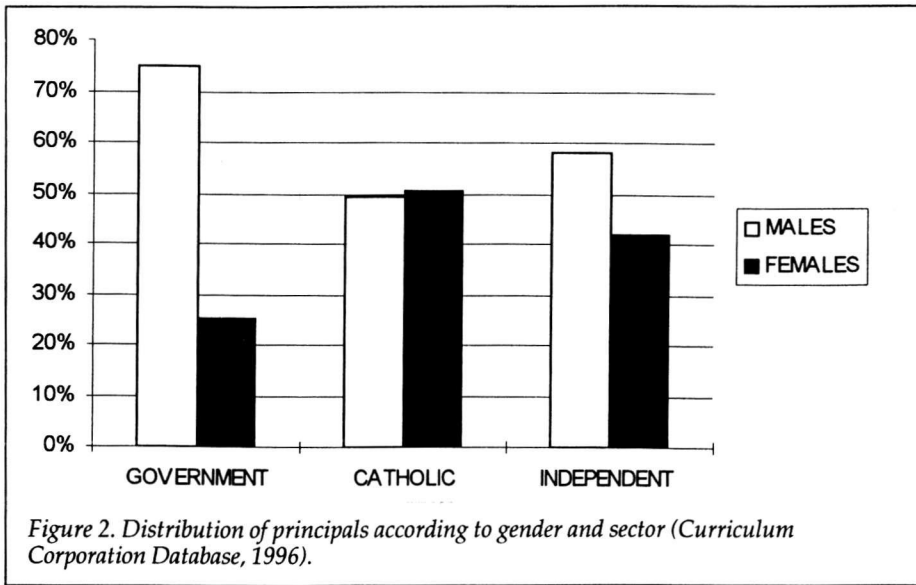
diverse forms of masculinity in Australia and illustrates this through case studies of working-class, environmental, gay, and corporate cultures. He also alerts us to different forms of femininity ranging from compliance with patriarchal cultures to active contestation of them. A logical extension of this perspective is to argue that the characteristics, cultures, and histories of particular schools and sectors generate diverse forms of masculine and feminine leadership. Indeed, a rich heritage of theory in educational administration argues that organizational context is a key influence on leader behavior. (Greenfield, 1975). If organizational context is important, it is likely that distinct environments may promote varied perceptions and beliefs among male and female leaders and even generate differences in each sex. It is also possible that similar contexts may ameliorate differences between men and women and draw them toward a consensus that belies oppositional typecasts.

Another problem in the field of leadership and gender has been the tendency for theorists to base claims on limited case studies and narrative accounts that cannot provide a representative basis on which to mount generic claims (Adler et al., 1993; Fennell; 1999; Hall, 1996; Hurty, 1995; Limerick & Anderson, 1999; Ozga, 1993). The rare studies that have made some attempt at representative sampling have all disputed the validity of gender typecasts (Coleman, 1998; Court, 1998; Evetts, 1994; Kruger, 1996; Shum & Cheng, 1997). The status of gender typologies in the field is therefore questionable, for the evidence to sustain them is inadequate. They cannot be regarded as incontrovertible foundations on which to build subsequent theory and practice, and we are well advised to heed recent advice to question such stereotypes (Blackmore, 1999; Grogan, 2000). There is a need for broad-scale studies to test the claims of qualitative research if we are to advance our understanding of the role of gender in school leadership.

Therefore, the study reported in this article adopted a research lens that attempted to explore the interactions of principals' gender with the key contextual variables of schools. Recent work in the United Kingdom has identified level of schooling as a factor that differentiates principals (Hall, 1996; Pascall & Ribbins, 1998). A distinguishing feature of the Victorian landscape is that a third of students are in nongovernment schools. In 1997 government schools accounted for 64%, Catholic for 23% and Independent sites for 11% of students in the state (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). It was therefore assumed that sectorial identity may be a more influential source of differences between principals than in other countries where the vast majority are in public schools. Many of the nongovernment schools are also segregated according to the sex of students, whereas almost all government sites are coeducational. The sex of students was, therefore, also investigated as a variable.

Research Method

In June 1996 the Curriculum Corporation estimated that there were 2,259 principals in Victoria. Of these 76% were in primary sites and 24% in secondary schools. The proportion of women was much higher at the primary than the secondary level (62% compared with 25%). There was also great variation according to sector (Figure 2).



The disparity in the proportions of men and women was most marked in the government sector, whereas in Catholic schools the proportion of women was marginally higher than the men.³

In 1997 a questionnaire was administered to a stratified sample of principals from all three sectors and both levels of schooling. It drew on contemporary research findings (Johnson & Holdaway, 1991; Ribbins, 1998) and direct knowledge of the tasks of Victorian principals.⁴ Participants were asked to respond to items according to a five-point Likert-like scale ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. The constellations included:

- perceptions and beliefs about students' abilities;
- perceptions and beliefs about curriculum goals and pedagogy;
- perceptions and beliefs about working with teachers;
- perceptions and beliefs about the roles of parents and community members;
- perceptions and beliefs about the nature of principalship;
- perceptions and beliefs about personal and professional well-being.

Each section explored a continuum ranging from hierarchical and bureaucratic to relational and collaborative concepts, and in this respect sought to test beliefs and values that earlier theorists have stereotyped as masculine and feminine. The sections on teachers' and parents' roles and on the principalship itself juxtaposed directive and exclusive stances with collaborative and participatory approaches. When it came to personal and professional well-being, the items ranged from isolated and aloof stances to collegial modes. A key aspect of this section was the use of metaphors of leadership that elicited affective responses whereas the rest of the questionnaire relied on more abstract statements.

Respondents had the option of volunteering for a confidential follow-up interview. Interview questions were linked to key concepts in the questionnaire, but also provided opportunities to question or qualify the questionnaire

items. The researcher completed a checklist while the interview was in progress. This was referred to continually during the transcription of the tapes. The interview responses were compared with patterns that emerged from the questionnaire. Although six months separated the two processes, there was a high degree of consistency in responses.

A total of 371 questionnaires were returned, establishing a response rate of 73.4%. Of these 51.1% were male principals and 49.9% female. Women from government secondary schools provided a particularly low response rate.⁵ A method of bivariate analysis was used to explore associations between variables. Responses were tabulated according to frequencies and then cross-tabulated according to the variables of gender, school level, sectoral identity, student gender, and school size. The cross-tabulations were then analyzed using the Pearson Test of Statistical Significance. Associations at the .05, .01, and .001 levels were considered significant and unlikely to be a function of sampling error. This method also enabled analysis of data in the form of paired observations on two variables such as principal gender and school sector. The findings indicated the presence or absence of a relationship between the two variables and also permitted a second level of analysis to determine whether the pattern according to principal gender as a solitary variable remained stable when school sector was considered.

Equal numbers of men and women were interviewed, and 24 transcripts were selected for analysis. The overall distribution according to sector was nine from each of the government and Catholic sectors and six from Independent schools. Of the 12 male principals, 10 came from coeducational and two from boys' schools. Of the female leaders, eight were drawn from coeducational sites and the other four from girls' schools.

The interview data were used to confirm, supplement, and expand understandings based on the quantitative data. Passages that illustrated or provided insights into key findings from the questionnaire were identified and transcribed. Thus it was akin to a validation exercise in that the knowledge claims that had emerged from the quantitative research were tested through a dialogue between researcher and a representative sample of the population who completed the questionnaire (Evers & Lakomski, 1996a, 1996b; Kvale, 1996). Responses that contradicted or qualified the questionnaire data and new emergent themes were noted. The combined method was a serious attempt to redress the absence of representative studies in the field and to supplement broad findings with understandings of the meanings and complexities that characterize principals' beliefs in the lived world.

Findings According to Principal Gender

The findings of this study indicate significant and previously unacknowledged variations in the perceptions and beliefs of male and female Victorian principals. Those reported in this article were all statistically significant ($p < .05$) or highly significant ($p < .01$). The claim that women are more aware of individual differences than men was confirmed (Gray, 1989). They were more sensitive to the difficulties of individuals and groups and also had higher expectations of student abilities. This was linked to a stronger commitment to more diverse forms of curriculum provision, whereas men were more satisfied if generic programs were in place. Men were somewhat more aligned to instrumental

and technical curriculum goals, and women were more oriented toward personal-developmental objectives. When the two types of goals were juxtaposed, the women were more adamant and unified about their beliefs than the men, who expressed greater uncertainty. However, this apparent conformity to gender stereotypes was qualified by interview responses from both groups. Many argued that a polarization between personal-developmental and utilitarian goals was too arbitrary and that the two were interdependent. Such responses suggest that the more reflective practitioners transcend gender polarities.

This study found only qualified support for claims that women are more oriented to the ethics of care and service than men (Hall, 1996; Noddings, 1984; Shakeshaft, 1987). Although women were more sensitive to individual and group learning needs, there was strong evidence in interviews that many male leaders also subscribe to such values. It could be argued that a stronger nurturant sensibility was reflected in the fact that higher proportions of women identified with the image of "advocate for children." However, two thirds of those who viewed themselves as "responsible parent figures" were men. This may reflect a patriarchal mindset, but it also indicates a strong sense of responsibility and care. The different image preferences suggest that men and women perceive their custodial roles in different ways, but this does not lead to the conclusion that they hold different beliefs. Such findings raise the possibility that differences between male and female leaders may be more related to different perceptual lenses than opposed values.

There was some evidence to support claims that men are more autonomous, rational, and analytical than women (Craib, 1987; Gilligan, 1982; Seidler, 1994; Steinberg, 1993). Women were markedly more committed to collegiality and teamwork. They were more willing to foster a consultative climate in the school and allow staff to participate in decision-making. They were more receptive to advice and demonstrated a greater tolerance for debate about goals and policies. However, such receptivity did not characterize their beliefs about parent participation. They were less optimistic and responsive in this area than men, who were more willing to consult parents and to engage them as participants in the school community. Such findings contradict Gilligan's relational thesis and suggest that female receptiveness may not extend beyond the schoolyard. This was also related to another recurrent pattern in the study. Female leaders were less oriented to forces outside the school than the men. This applied to parents, system activity, and even to consultation with other principals. It suggests that the female principals in Victoria were more internally focused in the organization, the men more sensitive to outside forces. This in turn supports claims that male principals are more politically aware than their female counterparts (Crow & Pounders, 1995; Ford, 1997).

There was consistent evidence that men perceive their leadership in terms of maintaining authority, status, and organizational control (Ferguson, 1984; Gray, 1989; Hudson & Jacot, 1991; Steinberg, 1993). They leaned more toward strong, directive approaches than women and believed teachers and parents expect such leadership and comply with decisions made in this mode. These beliefs were allied with their tendency to view teachers as agents responsible for fulfilling the policy mandates of authorities, whether they are from an

institutional or systemic level. A logical consequence was their preference for solid structural boundaries for accountability and reporting in schools. They were also more oriented toward tightly coupled policy and practice. Such tendencies were consistent with their stronger tendency to identify with the image of "line manager." Some would view these findings as evidence of a bureaucratic mindset and the polar opposite of the alleged relational modes of women. Men were also more inclined to see themselves as initiators and identify with metaphors of stability such as "a voice of authority" and "a rock in stormy waters." These could be typecast as the traditional masculine qualities that are claimed to permeate leadership discourse (Gronn, 1995).

Women in this study were more strongly oriented toward consultative and participatory modes of working with staff than men. They believed teachers want collaborative leadership and favored collective responsibility rather than frameworks for accountability. The women also held more active conceptions of teachers as continuing learners, placed greater value on teacher autonomy, and were more prepared to grant space for innovation and adaptation of sectorial policies to local realities. They were also more inclined to believe that teachers would question unilateral decisions, whereas men were more likely to expect them to implement system mandates without dissent. This was not to say that women lacked strong leadership vision. Indeed, they were more confident that they held an appropriate vision for the school community than the men. The difference lay more in how the vision was determined. Men appeared more predisposed to transmit a vision from a position of hierarchical authority, women to engage in more collaborative processes.

The study also confirmed claims that women are more oriented toward educational leadership than men (Ford, 1997; Shakeshaft, 1987). They were more focused on learning issues for both students and staff and held their views with stronger conviction. The fact that they were more likely to view themselves as "leading learners" was consistent with this trend. Differences between the sexes on pedagogical issues were only marginal, but women were much more opposed to a competitive ethic, and this lends some support to gender stereotypes. However, they were also more committed to uniform curriculum structures and program adherence, and this contradicts polarized images of rigid male bureaucrats and flexible female leaders. It suggests they were actually more definite in their views about curriculum provision. Just as they were more sensitive to the need to cater for individual and group differences, they were also more insistent that the response to such diversity must be structured and systematic. Their sensitivity was more than a caring sentiment: it was a strong professional commitment to providing appropriate learning structures for diverse populations of students.

The findings about personal and professional well-being refute claims that women find principalship more daunting than men. Men in this study consistently indicated that they experienced "exhaustion, isolation, and stress" in higher proportions than women. They were more frustrated by industrial relations and were less likely than women to indicate they would continue in the role in the future. Claims that women are more able to integrate personal and professional roles were also supported (Helgeson, 1991). Higher proportions of men indicated that they experienced conflict between personal and

professional roles. This calls multiple role explanations for why women are underrepresented in principalship into question and suggests that many of the women in this study have resolved such tensions more successfully than the men. The higher levels of stress among men suggest that its effect may have been overstated for female leaders and radically understated for the men. If this is true, then claims that women leaders suffer more from stress should be removed from their near-mythic status. Conversely, the much-noted claim of masculinist writers that Australian culture fails to acknowledge forces that undermine the personal well-being of men appear confirmed (Biddulph, 1994; Edgar, 1997, Tacey, 1997).

The Influence of Sector

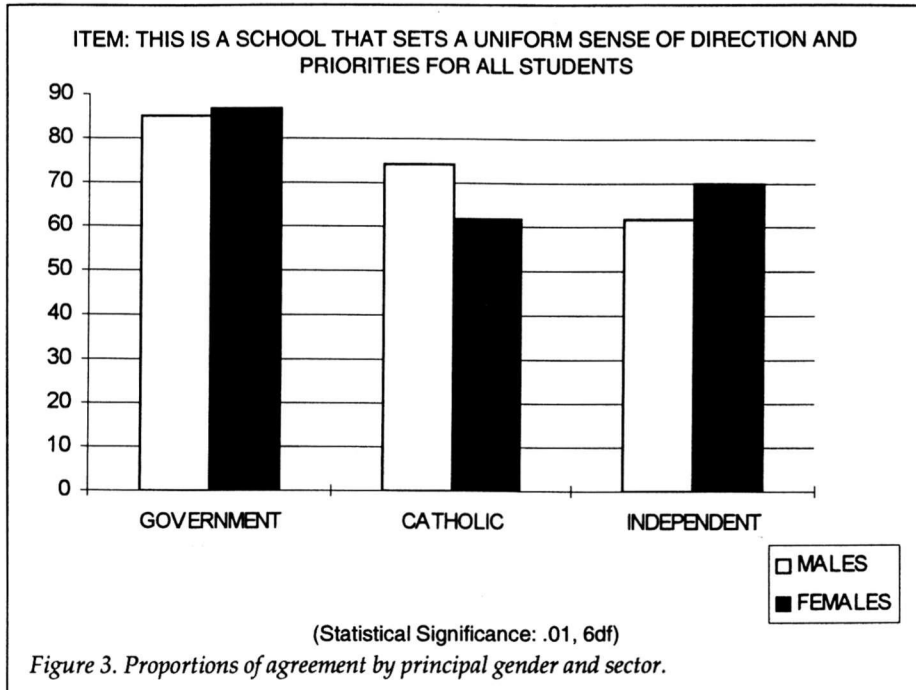
Highly significant variations were found when principals' gender and sector were considered in tandem. Distinctive histories, governance structures, and cultures appeared to exert a strong influence. Those from the government sector were highly attuned to concepts of public provision, system mandates, and political accountabilities. Catholic and Independent school principals appeared to operate from different values platforms. Both genders from Catholic schools were united by a strong commitment to collaborative values in areas as diverse as curriculum beliefs and leadership concepts. They were the most opposed to competitive values, whereas those from Independent schools were the most supportive of them. This sector was also more attuned to charismatic and directive forms of leadership. The sharpest contrast between male and female leaders occurred in the Independent sector. The consensus in the Catholic sector appears consistent with findings in such schools in other nations.

Government school principals were the least optimistic about the abilities of their student communities, were the most strongly committed to skill development, and the least oriented toward personal-developmental curriculum goals. They were also the most wedded to the need for uniform curriculum provision, to values of access and equity, and system accountabilities (Figure 3).

This orientation was also evident in their beliefs about working with teachers for they placed by far the strongest emphasis on working in system policies and adherence to particular curriculum mandates. They were also the most committed to engaging parents in various levels of policy-making and the most likely to view them as political entities both within and beyond the school. The systemic nature of the sector meant that government school principals were the most likely to identify with the image of "line manager."

Despite the close alignment of men and women from government schools about uniform student programs, they were also unanimous that system authorities were ill equipped to direct school practice. This contrasted strongly with an era of increasing centralized curriculum mandates (Caldwell & Haywood, 1998). A male leader from a regional secondary college insisted that the ideas of "system authorities" are "not necessarily that which is best" and that local level determination is more appropriate. A woman from a small rural primary site echoed his views:

System authorities don't know what is best for students. Unless you're working with a particular environment, unless you're working with the people, you can't



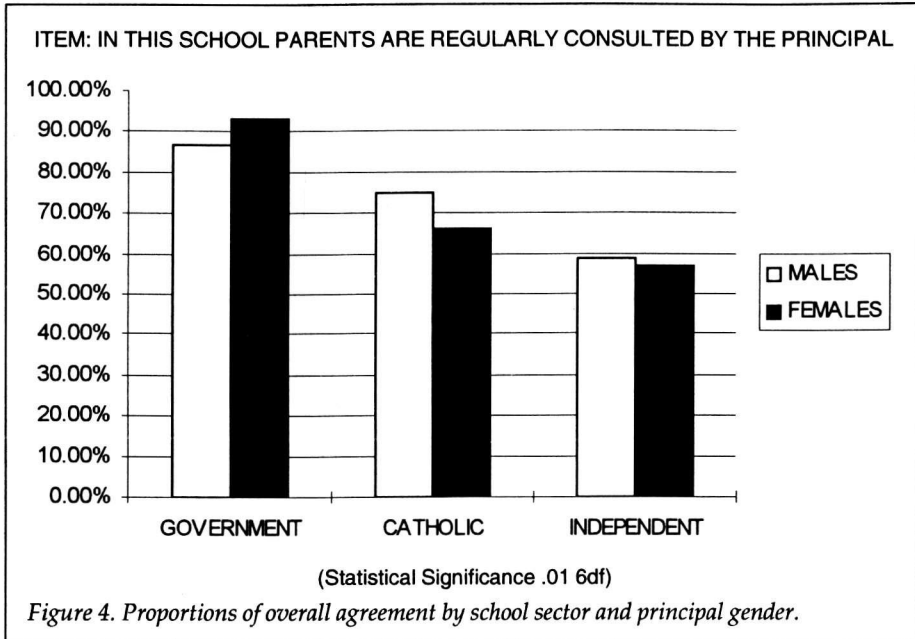
make a decision about things, the decisions are too impersonal.... there are matters that are more important than looking at programs or things that someone up above is saying, "Thou must do this!"

The consensus between the genders in government schools contradicts unitary stereotypes of male and female leaders. It indicates that sectorial values related to public provision drew both genders into a common belief platform. Their agreement about the importance of local policy-making also suggests a common reaction against increased system directives across primary and secondary levels of schooling and provides further testimony of the influence of sectorial culture.

Government school leaders were also united in their commitment to parent participation in schools, and differences between the sectors were again highly significant. However, both genders were in relative correspondence in each of the three sectors. This suggests that parent engagement is valued differently in each sector and that sectorial culture again appears to ameliorate gender differences. The less inclusive stance of women from the nongovernment sectors both contradicts gender stereotypes and indicates that sectorial values contribute to differences in the same gender (Figure 4).

The overall finding that Victorian male leaders held more inclusive attitudes toward parents was clearly a product of the more exclusive stance of women from nongovernment schools. Women from the Independent sector were most adamant on this issue. One from a coeducational outer urban school insisted:

Often what parents want is precisely what we don't.... Obviously every parent wants their child to be special and I respect that, but I know that there are many parents who want the entire school to change to accommodate their child.



Her colleagues from girls' schools shared her view. Such an attitude stands in stark contradiction to claims that female leaders are more relational. The histories of Independent girls' schools help to explain this phenomenon. Many of these schools began as cottage industries and family enterprises where women wielded firm control. They have a heritage of strong matriarchal leadership that is perhaps best illustrated through reference to the reign of Miss McCowan at Mentone Girls' Grammar from 1937 to 1955 who "tended to have firm ideas on many matters and put them into effect without reference to anyone ... The headmistress seemed concerned to run the school in the way she wanted" (Burren, 1984, p. 101). The highly significant differences between female leaders from the government and Independent sectors, therefore, needs to be understood in the context of the histories of the two sectors. Government school leaders have been encouraged to include parents in the life of schools as public institutions, and this contrasts with a strong tradition of regarding them as clients who have to be kept at a distance in Independent schools (Fitzpatrick, 1975; Theobald, 1996; Vlahogiannis, 1989).

The contrast between principals of both sexes from government and Independent schools continued in their perceptions of student populations and related beliefs about curriculum and pedagogy. The latter held much more optimistic expectations of students than leaders from the two other sectors. This was particularly true of the women from Independent schools, who were seven times more likely to believe their schools contained many high achievers. This undoubtedly reflects the more selective intake of the sector compared with government and Catholic schools, which serve broader publics. We are again presented with clear evidence that sectorial affiliation was linked to highly significant differences among female leaders (Figure 5).

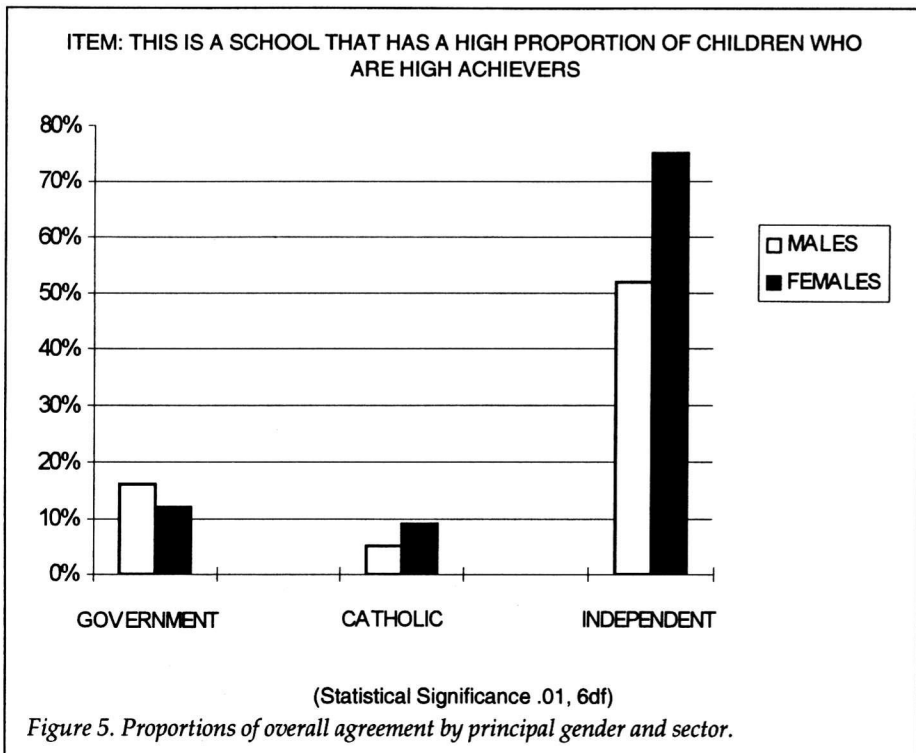
The pattern was replicated among the men, but it should be noted that those in the Independent sector were not nearly as optimistic as their female counter-

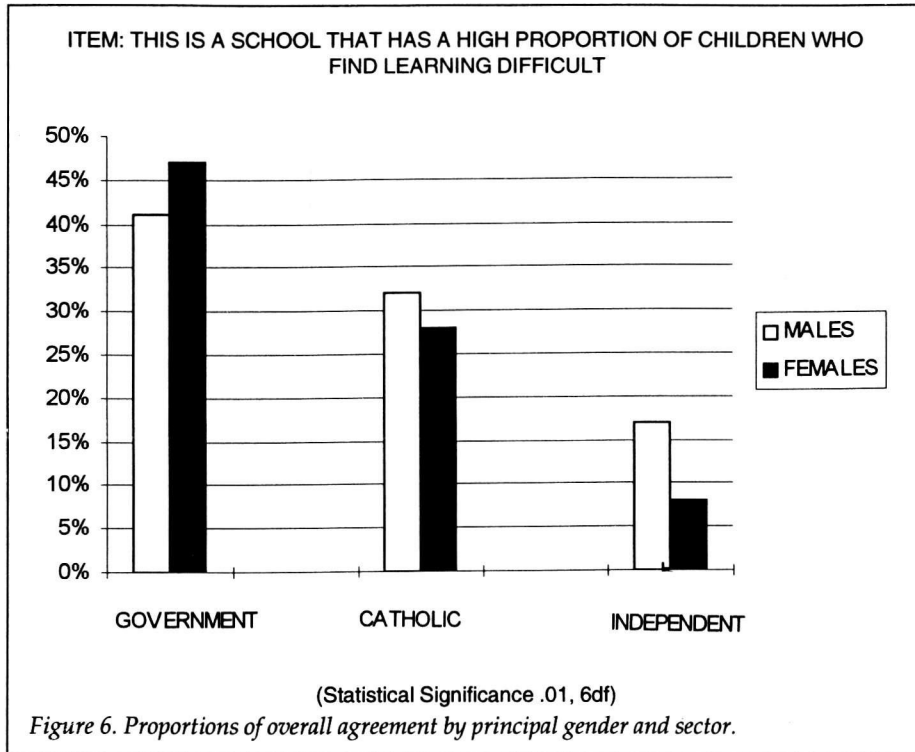
parts. Further analysis indicated that this difference in the sector could be linked to the sex of students. The female leaders of girls' schools differed radically from the leaders of boys' and coeducational sites in the sector. This was evident in the fact that 90% of them disagreed that their schools contained high proportions of students with learning difficulties, whereas the corresponding proportions from boys' and coeducational sites were 50% to 60%. The responses indicate the existence of a distinctive, optimistic, and achievement-oriented leadership culture among the female leaders of Independent girls' schools. It thereby suggests that perceptions according to principal gender and school sector are further modified by the sex of students and points to just how complex the interaction of the variables may become.

Government school leaders held much less optimistic perceptions of their student populations. They were the most inclined to agree that high proportions of children in their schools found learning difficult. Once again, the gender patterns across the sectors were inconsistent: women from governments schools were the least optimistic and those from Independent sites the most. The positioning of both genders from the Catholic sector midway between the other two also suggests that Catholic schools occupy the middle ground of the schooling landscape and thereby contribute to the perceptions of their leaders (Figure 6).

The pattern supports claims that the sectorial divisions both reflect and reproduce social inequalities in Victorian society (Teese, 1994).

The contrast between the sectors also extended to beliefs about curriculum goals. As might be anticipated, the secular traditions of government schooling



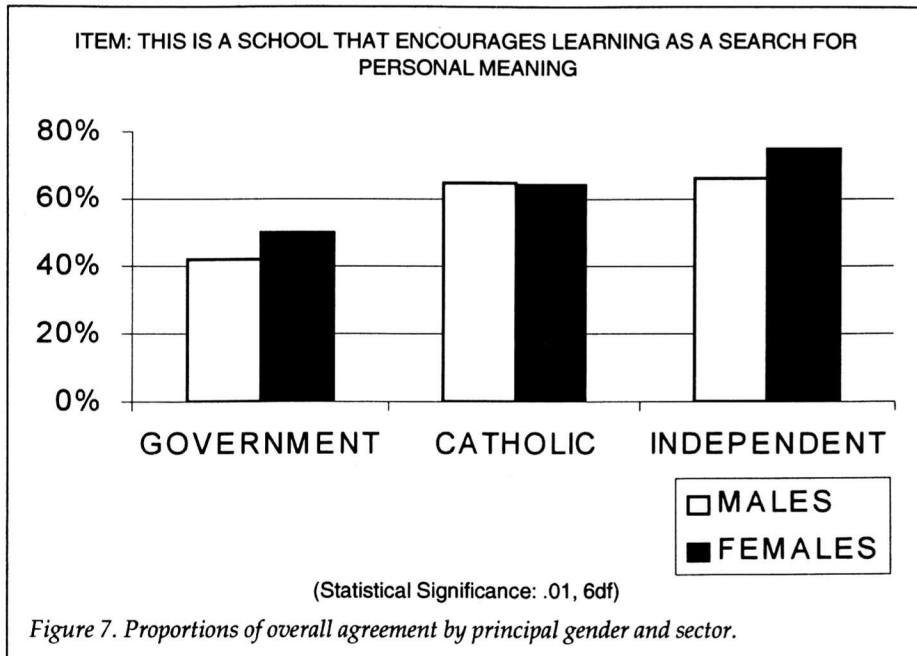


meant that the leaders were the least committed to personal-developmental goals. Conversely, the strongest support came from both sexes in the Independent sector. However, the unanimity of leaders from Catholic sites contrasted with the gender divide in the other sectors. This continues to point to another recurrent finding of the study: men and women in this sector appeared to be less divided by their gender than their counterparts in the other sectors. This in turn suggests a stronger consensus about core values in this sector (Figure 7).

Therefore, the study prompts a conclusion that the presence of strong sectorial values modifies potential differences between male and female leaders in schools.

There was also considerable evidence that men from Catholic schools held radically different beliefs on many issues from men in the other two sectors. They were much more committed to collaborative values than their counterparts from government sites. They were the most opposed to competitive forms of pedagogy, whereas men from Independent schools voiced the lowest opposition to it. High proportions of women from Catholic schools were also opposed to competition. Yet again, the gender divide was more pronounced in the other sectors. The contrast between women from Independent schools and women from the other sectors is also notable. Competitive ethics and market economy ideology have strong currency in this sector and appear to draw them toward consensus with the men on this issue (Figure 8).

Findings about staff management and leadership continued to delineate Catholic leaders as the most committed to collaborative values. They were the



least inclined to support directive forms of leadership and indicated the strongest support for staff consultation and participation. Men from Catholic sites were again clearly delineated from those in the other sectors. They were far less supportive of lines of authority and accountability than their female colleagues and continued to qualify essentialist typcasts.

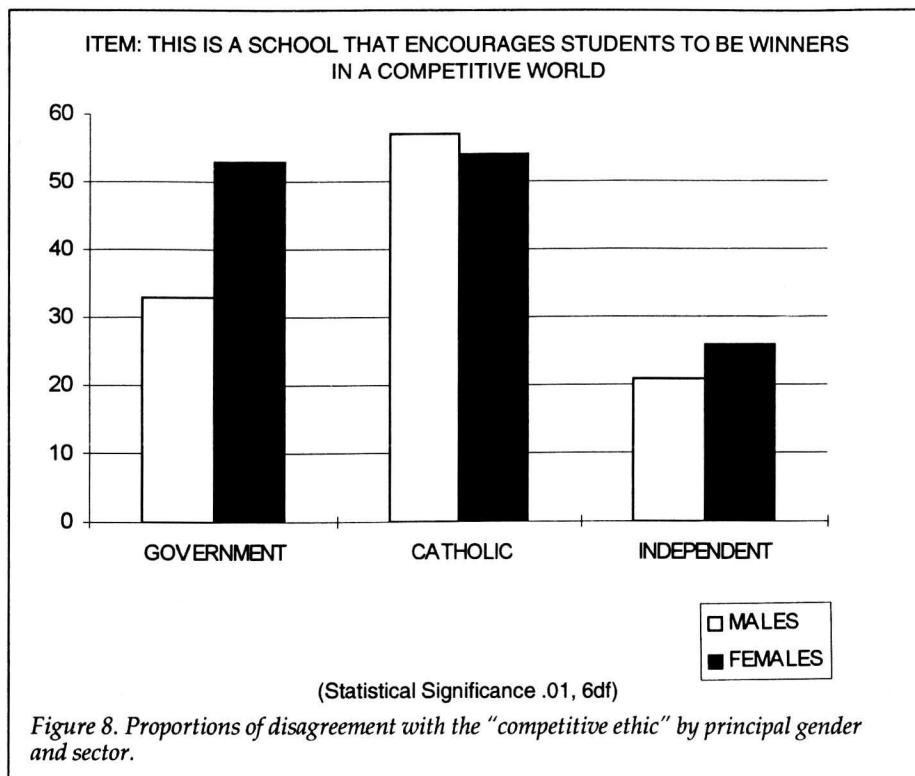
This contrast can be further traced to women from Catholic primary schools. They emerged as the most committed of the entire sample to individual provision and to collaborative involvement of staff in decision-making. However, they were also the least likely to sanction teacher autonomy or idiosyncrasies. One was forthright on this issue:

I value the initiative of individual teachers and the ability to deal with their own class ... but they can still work as a team to plan it ... I don't value the person who doesn't even know what others are doing and is so independent that they are eccentric or insular.

Such comments again force us to question stereotypes of women placing the quality of relationships over other considerations. They suggest that commitment to meeting the needs of students can result in demands for rigor and discipline rather than laissez-faire style collegiality.

The strong religious heritage of the Catholic sector was reflected in the finding that both genders from their schools were strongly inclined to identify with the image of the "servant leader." However, the highest rate of identification with this image came from men in the Independent sector. In this they contrasted sharply with women from the same sector.

The explanation again lies in sectorial histories. Religious congregations established many of the early Independent boys' schools, and headmasters were often drawn from the clergy. This was rarely the case with girls' schools. They frequently had to struggle to gain church sponsorship, and those that did



were likely to have male principals until well after World War II (Burren, 1984; Fitzpatrick, 1975; Gardiner, 1977; Hansen, 1986; Theobald, 1978, 1996; Zainu'ddin, 1982).

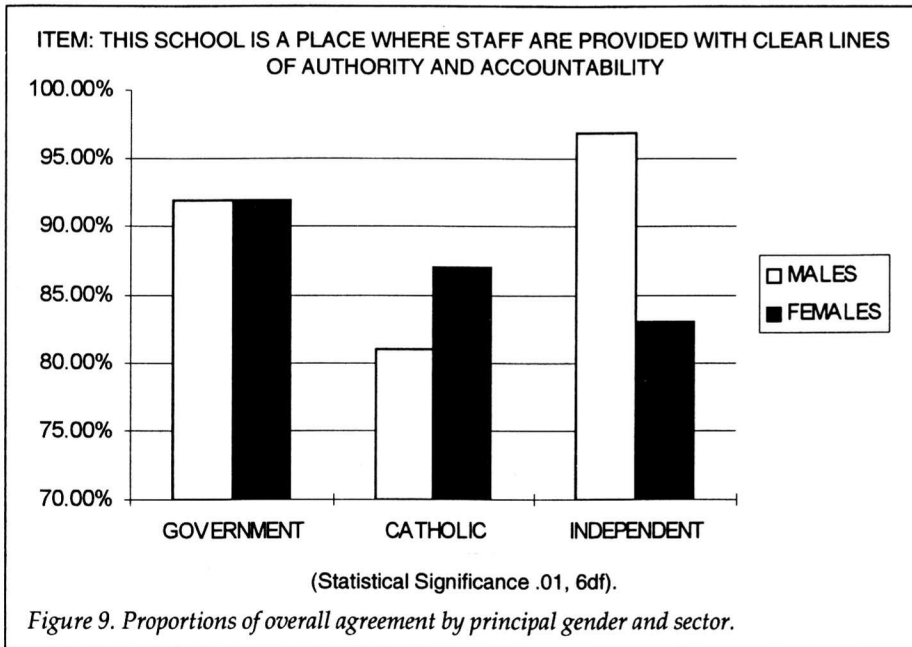
The image of "leading learner" held much stronger appeal for female leaders, and this was consistent across all three sectors. It corresponded with their stronger interest in learning issues for both students and staff.

By way of contrast, fewer than one in four men from government and Independent schools identified with this image, and this was also consistent with their lower interest in learning issues. Indeed, the finding provides some support for claims that women are more oriented toward forms of educational leadership and men toward organizational management. This is of some concern in an era where there are renewed demands for all principals to be visionary educational leaders (Caldwell & Spinks, 1998).

Conclusion

The findings of this study challenge the unquestioned status of unitary or essentialist gender stereotypes in discourse about school leaders. It is evident that key aspects of the school culture such as sectorial identity can modify differences between sexes and introduce important distinctions within them. It would appear that generalizations based on sector as a solitary variable are also contestable. Such findings challenge us to develop more sophisticated theories about the beliefs of principals and the contexts in which they work.

Awareness of important and frequently overlooked gender differences between male and female principals needs to be couched in a framework that



acknowledges that some aspects of organizational culture draw male and female leaders into common belief systems, and in such cases we are forced to conclude that sector is a more potent influence than gender. It is also evident that the influence of sector varies according to the issues concerned. It appears to be less powerful in generating differences about pedagogy than in relationships with staff and parents. Different values also appear to hold a different valence in specific sectors. Notions of public provision generate a strong unifying force in the government sector. Collaborative values appear to have a similar force in the Catholic sector. The fact that divisions were more apparent between men and women in the Independent sector may in turn reflect the prevalent values in the sector itself. Belief systems that value independence and autonomy may generate greater diversity among leaders than the more systemic structures of the government and Catholic sectors. The more extreme contrasts between male and female leaders in the Independent sector may be an artifact of the dominant values in the sector itself.

Differences between sexes in a sector also force us to acknowledge that the reality is more complex than a singular research lens illuminates. The sex of students seems to interact powerfully with principals' gender and sector to produce permutations that have not been recognized in the earlier literature. School level and size also introduce important variations, particularly in attitudes to staff management. In the final analysis, leadership theory needs to be skeptical about single-factor theories of beliefs and behavior. Schools are complex organizations where myriad forces interact and produce similar diversity and permutations among the leaders themselves, as Connell (1995) has noted in the broader social context. Leadership theory and research, like the field of gender theory itself, now needs to move beyond limited paradigms and develop investigative methods and conceptual frameworks capable of exploring the

complexities and nuances of the field. These must be based on recognition of the complexity of school contexts and the multiple influences on the perceptions and beliefs of leaders. It is also likely that other factors such as age, ethnicity, and personal histories penetrate and complicate gender boundaries. It would be illuminating if future research attempted to analyze such factors so that the leadership discourse could be based on more precise understandings of the key influences on beliefs and practice.

Notes

1. The existence of three school sectors, government, Catholic, and Independent, is a distinguishing feature of the Australian school landscape that stands in stark contrast to the dominance of public school systems in Europe and the United States. It reflects the demographic and religious history of the nation. Denominational and private schools existed before the legislation that established compulsory schooling and public systems to deliver it in the various Australian colonies in the 1870s (Austin, 1977; Barcan, 1980). The legislation was accompanied by bitter sectarian debates as religious denominations contested the "free, secular, and compulsory" charters of the new public schools. Indeed, the introduction of public provision did not cause the demise of private or denominational schools. The private establishments continued and became known as Independent schools. Various religious groups, and most notably the Catholic bishops, responded by establishing parochial schools with different emphases and values from those of the government sector. The consequence is the existence of strong nongovernment school sectors that educate approximately 25% of Australian children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). The existence of distinctive cultures, traditions, and values in nongovernment schools is central to the work of the principals who lead them.
2. In 1993 men held over 50% of primary principalships and 80% of secondary headships in England and Wales (Department of Education, 1994). In the US, it has been estimated that women held 34% of principalships in 1993 (Montenegro, 1993). In New Zealand men occupied 73% of primary and 81% of secondary principalships in 1995 (Pringle & Timperly, 1995). Proportions of women in the principalship are even lower in continental Europe. In the Netherlands they only occupied 12% of primary and 4% of secondary positions (Shakeshaft, 1994). In Sweden, despite a decade of affirmative action policies, they were still less than a third in both school types by 1993 (McMaster & Randall, 1995). Greece, France, and Ireland record higher proportions of women in primary principalships (41%-47%), but markedly lower proportions in the role in secondary schools (Shakeshaft, 1994).
3. This may reflect the fact that large numbers of women from religious orders were principals in this sector in the past. However, the proportions have been in sharp decline since the 1970s.
4. These themes were confirmed by Marland's observation from the Inaugural International Conference of Secondary Principals held in Switzerland in 1993. He noted, "the remarkable similarity of the problems which principals face in a wide variety of political and social contexts: staff leadership, pupil management, curriculum planning, resource control and management of public relations" (Ribbins, 1998, p. 4).
5. Several female leaders from government secondary schools had been replaced by men in the interval between the construction of the Curriculum Corporation (1996) database and the administration of the questionnaire 12 months later. Investigation indicated that many of them were on sick leave and that men were acting in their place.

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