Profiles of Late Career Female Leadership in Australian Rural Schools

Judith Miller
Lorraine Graham
Azhar Al-Awiwe

Please address all correspondence to:
Dr Judith Miller
School of Education
University of New England
Armidale, New South Wales, 2351
Australia
61 2 6773 5071
jmiller7@une.edu.au

Paper presented at the
British Educational Research Association
London, September 6-8th, 2011
ABSTRACT
Rural schools in New South Wales, Australia, have been a focus of investigations by the University of New England’s Bushtracks Research Collective since 2001. The research presented in this paper, centres on the roles that late-stage career female leaders have in rural schools. Specifically, interview questions probed four late career female teachers’ personal and professional challenges and motivations to accept formal and informal leadership roles within rural teaching opportunities. All interview data were recorded, transcribed, manually coded for themes, and then analysed using the Leximancer text mining software. This research provides a rich context-oriented view of rural school leaders. The findings highlight the importance of cooperative personal styles and the kind of career advancement associated with both formal and informal leadership positions. Implications from these findings may usefully inform pre-service teacher education programs and postgraduate school leadership awards.

BACKGROUND
Rural schools in New South Wales Australia have been a focus of investigations by the University of New England’s Bush Tracks Research Collective since 2001. Drawing on the previous Bush Tracks research, which has investigated the challenges and opportunities faced by both teachers and school leaders in rural schools (McConaghy et al., 2005; McConaghy, 2006), this paper initially reports on several issues related to the experiences of early career rural teachers and their views on rural school leadership (see also Graham, Paterson & Miller, 2009; Miller, Graham & Paterson, 2006). The specific contribution of this paper, however, pertains to the addition of information gathered from interviews with late career female leaders (Al-Awiwe, 2011), which allow comparisons to be made between their experiences and that of the early career teachers who may have experienced opportunities for accelerated leadership.

The issues surrounding teaching and leading in rural schools include attracting and retaining teaching staff and high staff turnover (Graham, Miller and Paterson 2009; Yarrow et al., 1999). These concerns are not isolated to schools in New South Wales, as this trend has been mirrored in other countries throughout the world (e.g., USA, Canada and New Zealand). In some contexts these issues have been framed in ‘crisis’ terms, particularly for subject areas such as special education, mathematics and science (Herrington & Herrington 2001; Lang, 1999; White, 2006).
Although retention of teachers in particular subject areas is of concern, the rapid turnover of personnel in leadership positions also brings with it considerable challenges (Graham, Paterson, & Miller, 2008). However, to date, there has been little specific investigation of female leadership in rural school contexts. The research presented in this paper adds to information about the growing trend for more women to be in management and senior leadership roles (Davidson & Burke, 2004). This work is precipitated by comments such as that made by Bush (2011, p. 1) that “women are under-represented in school leadership and management positions, and this is particularly so for head teachers and principals”.

While our previous research suggests that increasing numbers of women hold leadership roles in rural schools and that many early career teachers have moved into these leadership roles in accelerated timeframes (Graham, Miller & Paterson, 2009), there are still significant challenges to be faced. For example, although women outnumber men in the teaching force, they are underrepresented in positions of school leadership. For example, according to the NSW Department of Education (2003) annual report, 65.27% (32,503) of the total teaching service are female, but only 2.54% (826) fill principal positions. In this study, information from interviews with four late career teachers who have held leadership positions helps build a fuller understanding of profiles of female leadership in Australian rural schools.

**Methodology**

This research was initially informed by previously collected survey data. These data were collected from 278 teachers in the vicinity of the University of New England, New South Wales, Australia (McConaghy et al., 2005). Survey participants were invited to indicate whether they would be available for follow-up interviews. Members of the Bushtracks Research Collective then travelled to locations within 500 km of the university and worked in teams of two to conduct structured interviews with 16 interviewees. From these data, early career female leaders emerged as a cohort of interest as there was strong evidence that new scheme and early career teachers were being invited to accept formal and informal positions of school leadership in accelerated timeframes (Graham, Miller & Paterson, 2009).

As an extension to the previous study, then, in this research four late career female leaders were interviewed. Two researchers, with one researcher posing the semi-structured interview questions, and the other writing field notes, conducted all interviews. The four interviews were recorded, transcribed, and manually coded to identify themes. In order to provide further
contextual analysis, the data were then analysed using the Leximancer text mining software (Smith, 2000).

Summary profiles of the four late career school-based leaders interviewed are provided below.

- Catherine: This interviewee was a primary school principal for the last 15 years of her career. Initially, Catherine taught in a large city school for four years before acting as an assistant principal for twelve years in rural and remote schools. Catherine’s school was the most geographically isolated of all the interviewees. For the majority of her teaching and leading career, Catherine had sole responsibility for parenting a child with special needs.

- Elenor: This interviewee was a primary school principal with 12 years experience in leadership positions. Her early career experience was teaching in metropolitan schools, however, the majority of her teaching experience was gained in rural and regional settings. Elenor is married to a fellow principal. Together they raised two children while balancing their successful careers in education.

- Rhonda: Rhonda was a secondary school Head Teacher about to retire from the Department of Education and Communities after 35 years as a teacher and ten years as Head Teacher of Personal Development, Health and Physical education (PDHPE). Rhonda is married to a former leading teacher. Together they have raised three children. Rhonda was a passionate advocate for one of her children who has a profound hearing loss.

- Denise: This interviewee was a pre-school teacher and, subsequently, the Principal of a Kindergarten to Year 6 school for Indigenous students, located in a regional centre. Denise is a recently widowed Indigenous woman married to a leading sporting figure who raised four children while pioneering culturally inclusive teaching and leadership in her rural community.

The following interview questions were asked of the four late-career teachers:
1. Have you experienced opportunities to lead in rural schools in an accelerated timeframe?
2. How do you characterise your style of leadership?
3. In your opinion, are opportunities for leadership different for men and women?
Results of the manual thematic coding of responses to these interview questions are presented in the next section, followed by a description of the subsequent Leximancer analysis.

RESULTS
The three research questions asked of the late career teachers frame the following discussion of results.

Accelerated Leadership Opportunities
Catherine reported that she had not experienced accelerated progression on a personal level, but she had observed it occurring for others who were successfully promoted to merit-based positions. She reported that, in her opinion, men, more than women, experienced accelerated progression opportunities. She related a powerful personal example where one male teacher went from being a classroom teacher to a principal of a rural school in three years.

Denise said that she became the Director of a pre-school and later principal of an Indigenous primary school, through a combination of experience, gaining qualifications, mentoring and succession planning. She did not view her leadership role as being attained in an accelerated timeframe. Similarly, Elenor reported that she did not experience accelerated progression. She considered her application for a leadership position in a large regional school successful due to her experience and postgraduate qualifications. In contrast, Rhonda indicated that she had experienced accelerated progression. When Rhonda took a consultant’s role early in her career and found that the professional development it afforded her assisted in subsequent promotion positions.

In summary, of the four interviewees, only Rhonda reported that she had personally experienced accelerated progression into a formal leadership role. Catherine, however, had observed the career advantages that accelerated progression can facilitate. Denise and Elenor both indicated that they felt they were fully qualified for the leadership positions they achieved later in their careers.

Leximancer Results. Analysis of the interview data using the Leximancer software confirmed the results obtained through manual coding. Four themes were identified using the criteria that the visible concepts controls were set at 80%, with the theme size set to 40%. Based on these criteria, dominant themes were:

- school (absolute count = 6, ranked concept = 100%)
- club (absolute count = 5, ranked concept = 80%)
- experienced (absolute count = 2, ranked concept = 30%)
- leadership (absolute count = 2, ranked concept = 30%)
The highest ranked concept was ‘school’ (100%) which appeared six times in the data set of four interviews. The relationship between the four dominant themes is shown in the Leximancer concept map depicted in Figure 1. This diagram shows that the brightest circle is ‘school’. Concepts that appear in closest proximity are ‘school’; ‘club’; and ‘experienced’. Therefore, ‘school’, ‘club’ and ‘experienced’ co-occur in similar conceptual contexts in the transcripts of the interviews.

Figure 1: Thematic map for accelerated progression into formal leadership roles

Two arguments can be deduced from the concepts in the central part of the map read in conjunction with the interview data. Firstly, ‘school’ has been mentioned in different ways and connected with ‘principal’ and ‘head’ concepts many times in responses to this interview question. For example, Catherine reported that, “a young man, a casual . . . He was promoted to a principal in a primary school”. Another example comes from Denise who said, “Once I got my degree I was able to become the Head of the pre-school. It was decided by the current Head”.

Secondly, ‘club’ has a relationship with the concepts ‘male’ and ‘men’. For example, Catherine reported that, “Men will say, ‘I want to be a principal’ and he doesn’t care what happens to get there and he gets in as one of the boys’ club.” Men had experienced accelerated progression into formal leadership roles more than women in the opinions of the female leaders interviewed. The next section reports on the women’s view of their leadership style.

**Leadership Style**
There was confirmation in this study of the collaborative leadership style of the women interviewed. Teamwork was a
hallmark of the leadership of all four female school leaders. The majority (3 of 4) of the interviewed female school leaders specifically reported that they identified their leadership style as ‘collaborative’ style. They all indicated that they work with staff and students in their school using team approaches. Two of the female leaders in the study agreed that in their opinions working in a collaborative style is better than operating using an authoritarian style.

Catherine stated that she always aimed to work in collaboration with staff, students and parents. She indicated that her style of leadership was collaborative and innovative. In addition, she was a person who could “take on” change. Her “open door” policy extended to both staff and students. The leadership style to which she felt most aligned was a collaborative style, not authoritarian or “bossy”.

In contrast, Denise indicated that her style of leadership had its foundation in the environment within which she was raised. She recounted a deeply personal story about her grandfather and his reaction when people from the Welfare Department put a fence around the mission1 where she lived. She said that, “They took away our leadership and the responsibility of our elders”. Denise asked her grandfather “Why did you let them do that?” Her grandfather answered, “The welfare knows best.” Because of this experience, Denise thought that if she did not align her emancipatory style of leadership within government and system guidelines, she would never get a positive result from her efforts.

Denise said that she really developed and refined her style of leadership when she became the director and Principal of an Indigenous primary school. She encouraged everybody in the school, including students’ parents, to “contribute to their circle” and to work together as a team. She said that the importance of this structure for Aboriginal people was to “develop their own self esteem and enjoy the encouragement of being a team player”. She wanted all her staff members to take part and to be able to walk and talk together.

Elenor stated in her interview that her leadership style could be characterised as very collaborative and that she worked with teachers as part of a team. She described herself as a “strategic” person who likes to work out what needs to be done. That might include analysis of data or involve conversation with others in order to network and achieve shared goals. Elenor said that she

---

1 *Mission* is a term for Aboriginal settlements established by Christian groups in the early 1900’s to the 1950’s depending on the location within Australia. Missions were designed to assist Aboriginal people – but there are various accounts of misuse or abuse of Indigenous people at the hands of mostly well-meaning clergy on missions, reserves or stations.
"was always a great observer of what works and what doesn’t work”. She arrived at her leadership style through observation, modelling herself on the behaviour of successful people, and using Michael Fullan’s research as an academic touchstone. She always remained involved in professional learning through her own University study and involvement in selected programs provided by the NSW Department of Education and Communities.

Rhonda also worked with the staff members in the role of team leader. Self described as a “democratic” person who worked with others to find the best methods to achieve goals together. Additionally, she described herself as a leader who “looks for the broader picture to find the best way to go forward”. While encouraging her staff to work as a team, she felt she didn’t deal with them as an authoritarian “boss”. On reflection, Rhonda considered she arrived at her leadership style through being a “mentor” to others, and sharing same benefits she felt she had gained from professional learning opportunities.

**Leximancer Results.** Further analysis of the interview data was performed using the Leximancer text-mining software tool. Analysis of the semantic patterns within the interview data using Leximancer resulted in the identification of four dominant themes. Visible concepts were delineated as greater than 15%, with theme size set as at least 80%. Based on these criteria, themes from the Leximancer analysis of all interview responses were:

- **successful** (absolute count = 17, ranked concept = 100%)
- **style** (absolute count = 9, ranked concept = 54%)
- **research** (absolute count = 3, ranked concept = 29%)
- **team** (absolute count = 3, ranked concept = 19%)

Absolute counts refer to the number of times concepts were found in the interview data. Consequently, ‘successful’ was the highest ranked concept (100%) appearing 17 times in the data set comprised of the transcripts from four interviews. From the four participants’ responses to this interview question, the brightest circle evident in Figure 2 contains the term ‘successful’. In this graphic representation of the data, the concepts that appear nearest to each other are ‘successful’, ‘style’ and ‘team’. Therefore, ‘successful’, ‘style’ and ‘team’ co-occur in similar conceptual contexts within the data set.

Proximity of concepts in Figure 2 signifies semantic and argumentative nearness. The concept map shows many concepts in the central region such as ‘successful’ and ‘style’, which overlap, ‘team’, ‘best, and ‘work’.
Two conclusions can be deduced from the Leximancer analysis of responses to this question. Firstly, the interviewees repeated the word ‘successful’ many times. For example, Catherine said that she arrived at her style of leadership through examples of “successful leaders”. Secondly, Catherine, Elenor and Rhonda all mentioned a collaborative leadership style in answer to this question. Their style of leadership was arrived at through their experiences of working with other successful leaders. This explanation begins to illuminate the overlap between the ‘successful’ cluster and ‘style’ cluster of concepts.

Describing the cluster group that comprises a theme more fully enables further exploration of the dominant theme. For example, as shown in Figure 2, the cluster group inside the circle defining ‘successful’ includes ‘successful’ (100%), ‘thought’ (100%) and ‘people’ (67%). These were major concerns of the respondents: that their leadership was thoughtful, successful and considerate of the needs of all the people involved. Overall, then, the Leximancer analysis provides a confirmation of the general understandings formed from the manual analysis of the interview data.

Leadership opportunities

In response to the question regarding her perceptions of leadership opportunities, Catherine said that prospects for men and women are often equal and fair. However, she stressed that her observations were based on experience with primary school contexts where approximately 70% of all teachers are female and 30% male. Catherine observed that 70% of leaders were males and only 30% of leaders were females in this same primary school context. She questioned the reasons behind this disparity.
Denise reported that in her opinion males and females are equal in terms of access to leadership positions. From her observations she had not observed one gender more advantaged than the other. Denise did note, however, that in terms of schools for Indigenous students, there are mostly women in the available leadership positions.

In response to this interview question, Elenor indicated that she had given this question considerable thought and had concluded that there was a difference. Over the last 40 years, Elenor has observed many cases where men became principals quickly. On the other hand, she noted that many hardworking women stayed in assistant principal positions. She summed up that, “Men enjoy the more high profile jobs and can do them because they have women working behind them”.

Rhonda agreed that there are more men in leadership positions. She thought that a possible reason for some of the difference was that men “expect that they will be leaders and are less likely to stay satisfied as followers”. From her observations, Rhonda concluded that men want their points of view to be heard. They accept being school leaders when they have the opportunity and routinely have less intense family responsibilities to juggle alongside their careers. Rhonda thought that women work very hard to be successful in leadership positions, but are often more reluctant to take on such roles because of their demands.

In summary, Catherine, Elenor and Rhonda shared the view that women are underrepresented and need to work hard to be considered for leadership positions. From a contrasting perspective, Denise thought that males and females are given equal opportunities to contribute through filling leadership positions.

Leximancer Results. Further analysis of the interview data collected in response to this question confirmed the general findings presented in the previous section. Four dominant themes were evident, using the criteria that visible concepts are set at 50% and theme size at 30%. Based on these criteria, the dominant themes were:

- person (absolute count = 4, ranked concept = 100%)
- leadership (absolute count = 9, ranked concept = 96%)
- schools (absolute count = 5, ranked concept = 85%)
- true (absolute count = 9, ranked concept = 77%)

The highest ranked concept was ‘person’ (100%) appearing 4 times in the data set from the four interviews. The relationship between the four dominant themes is shown in the Leximancer concept map provided in Figure 3. The brightest concept circle
was related to the concept of ‘person’. Concepts that appeared in close proximity to each other are ‘person’, ‘leadership’, ’schools’ and ‘true’.

![Thematic map for equality of appointment of males and females to leadership positions](image)

Two clarifications can be deduced from the concepts identified in Figure 3. Firstly, the four interviewed female leaders used the word ‘person’ in different types of sentences. For example, Catherine reported that, “in the case of women, if she is not married to another school person, then she is limited by her husband’s work”. Secondly, the ‘true’ concept is positioned in relation to the ‘men’ and ‘leadership’ concepts. Three of the four interviewed female leaders agreed that it was ‘true’ that more males than females were appointed to leadership positions. For example, Elenor answered, “I thought about this a lot and I thought it was true”. Catherine, as well, agreed with Elenor when she stated, “It seems very true actually that men are given more opportunities”.

**DISCUSSION**

The interview data provided strong evidence that all of the female leaders in this study preferred to work with their staff members, students and their parents as part of a team. Three of the interviewed women specifically reported that they identify themselves as using a collaborative style of school leadership. The remaining interviewee described her approach as emancipatory. Leximancer analyses provided further understanding of the respondents’ leadership styles, and the importance of experiencing firsthand mentoring from other successful leaders. All the respondents considered that they
thought that women evidenced greater empathy, were more caring about students and liked to work using shared, teamwork approaches. These results were confirmed by the Leximancer analyses.

Research focusing on principals in the USA, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada indicates that female leaders are more likely to work in a cooperative style (Hall 1996 cited in Bush & Coleman 2008, p. 31). Bush and Coleman (2008, p. 31) also indicated that a collaborative style of management was reported in their study of senior female educators. Although this research is limited in scope, it is in alignment with previous work and provides a targeted view of the types of career profiles relevant to late career leaders in NSW rural schools.

**Conclusion**

This research was designed as an extension to previous studies that explored female teachers’ early career progression. Interviews with four late-career leaders provided a snapshot of leadership opportunities that they experienced throughout their careers. On the whole, the careers of these experienced educators were not characterised by rapid transitions into leadership roles, but a more measured and sustained progression marked by the accumulation of years of teaching experience, the gaining of relevant qualifications and the gradual assumption of leadership responsibilities. All four of the school leaders interviewed reported styles of leadership that were collaborative, emancipatory and incorporated team approaches.

The issue of male colleagues being promoted to leadership roles at an accelerated rate is understood in this study by the general view that women are more willing to take on supportive and informal roles in schools, rather than formal leadership positions. Further exploration of the factors underlying this situation is warranted. In addition, other implications of the tentative findings presented here include recognising the importance of (i) identifying effective ways to prepare and support pre-service teachers prior to their appointment to rural schools, and (ii) including professional development targeted to the needs of Principals of small rural schools in departmental and university-based leadership courses.
REFERENCES


