

FAST TRACK, BUSH TRACK: LATE CAREER FEMALE RURAL SCHOOL LEADERS TAKING THE SLOW ROAD

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ABSTRACT

Previous research related to this study explored early career female leaders' experiences in rural school settings, and probed the personal and professional challenges they faced and their motivations to accept formal and informal leadership roles ahead of the usual timeframes (e.g., Graham, Miller & Paterson, 2009). This study set out to explore these findings further by interviewing four late career female leaders. These women reported less accelerated progression to leadership roles compared to their early career counterparts. They also revealed differences in style of leadership and experiences of gender differences with regard to leadership opportunities. These findings usefully inform policy makers and pre-service teacher education programs by highlighting the value of a career-span view of rural school leadership for women.

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 Bush Tracks research, which sought to identify the challenges and opportunities faced by both teachers (McConaghy, Graham, Bloomfield, Miller, Paterson, Lloyd, Jenkins, Taylor, Hardy & Noone, 2005; McConaghy, Lloyd, Hardy, & Jenkins, 2006) and school leaders in rural schools, this paper builds on several issues previously investigated by the Bush Tracks Team. Specifically, it combines a focus on early career rural teachers (e.g. Graham, Paterson & Miller, 2008; Miller, Graham & Paterson, 2006) and their views on rural school leadership (e.g. Miller, Graham & Al-Awiwe, 2011) with an opportunity to explore the experiences of late career female leaders in rural schools. Delving into the experiences and preferred styles of leadership of experienced female school leaders is relatively new for research in rural contexts.

Many of the issues surrounding teaching and leading in rural schools focus on attracting and retaining teaching staff and the implications of high staff turnover. Succession planning, smooth transitions from prior to new school staff members, and their subsequent lack of knowledge of students and their families are consequences of the high turnover of teaching and leadership staff in rural and remote schools (Graham, Miller & Paterson, 2009; Yarrow, Herschell & Millwater, 1999). These concerns are not isolated to schools in New South Wales with this trend mirrored in other countries like the USA, Canada and New Zealand. In some contexts these issues have been framed in 'crisis' terms, particularly, with regard to staffing for the discipline areas of special education, mathematics and science (Herrington & Herrington, 2001; Lang, 1999; White, 2006).

Although retention of teachers in particular subject areas is of concern there is also a rapid turnover in leadership positions in many rural school settings (Graham et al., 2008). Within this situation, there exists a lack of focus on the gender issues concerned with teaching and leading in rural contexts. Although it is the case that women are increasingly filling senior roles in educational organizations,

(Davidson & Burke, 2004), Bush (2011) indicates that, “women are under-represented in school leadership and management positions, and particularly so for head teachers and principals” (p. 1). While Bush Tracks research outcomes suggest that women hold a significant proportion of leadership roles in rural schools, these investigations also suggest that many early career teachers have moved into leadership roles in accelerated timeframes (Graham, Paterson & Miller, 2008) and that it may be useful to bring a career-span perspective to understanding rural school leadership opportunities for women.

Women increasingly occupy leadership positions employing styles of leadership that differ along gender lines (Eagly & Sczentsny, 2009). While organisational research has focused on issues of gender (Tomas & Lavie, 2010), the same level of focus has not been given, in general, to gender within the educational leadership literature (Anderson & Cawsey, 2008; Dunshea, 1998). For example, in a meta-analysis of school principals and their gender and leadership style, Eagly, Karau and Johnson (1992) compared the decision-making processes of public schools principals and found evidence of differences between male and female principals, with female principals scoring higher on measures of task-orientation and displaying more democratic and participative styles of leadership in their schools. Differences between male and female principals with regard to interpersonal style were not evident, however.

As stated earlier, although women outnumber men in the NSW government teaching force, they are outnumbered in positions of leadership. In the context of school leadership, according to the NSW Department of Education and Communities (2009) annual report, 67.42% (31,466) of the total teaching service are female, with only 3.4% (1,066) employed as principals. Of the 2,215 principals in NSW, 1,066 are female and 1,149 are male. A higher percentage of males are in leadership roles than women. Interestingly, Dunshea (1998) focused her attention on the specific needs of women in their first year of the principalship in rural areas. This research highlighted the affect on women of taken for granted assumptions that all principal experiences are ‘male’, and exposed the social biases of sexism that confront females as they grapple with being accepted as professional leaders in conservative rural communities.

Several other related research themes emerge from the literature related to women in organisational leadership roles, as school leaders, and in particular, in the context of teaching in rural schools. Rural contexts have been described as socially conservative (Hatton, 1996), which increases the challenges for female principals appointed to schools in these contexts (Dunshea, 1998). Although previous research has provided a specific view and exploration of the experiences of teachers in rural and regional New South Wales, these studies were focused on early career (e.g. Graham et al., 2008). This study aims to build on these previous investigations and add to our understanding of women’s experiences of teaching and leading in rural schools in two ways. First, it will set out to verify the issues surrounding early career leadership opportunities previously reported (e.g. Miller et al., 2006). Then, it will provide a counterbalance by exploring the experiences of four late career school leaders who were interviewed to provide insight into and examples of whole career profiles of female rural school leaders.

METHODOLOGY

This research builds on earlier research that focused on the analysis of survey and interview data collected from 278 teachers working within the New England area of north-western New South Wales (McConaghy et al., 2005). Early career female leaders emerged as a cohort of interest from these data and as a result their data were analysed separately for themes and trends. Strong evidence emerged from this investigation that early career teachers were being invited to accept formal and informal positions of leadership within accelerated timeframes (Graham et al., 2009) in rural schools. Specifically, teachers’ personal and professional challenges and their motivations to accept leadership roles were framed within the context of early career rural teaching opportunities (Graham et al., 2009). To add a career-span perspective to these data, four late career female leaders were recruited and interviewed as a part of this study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

As the purpose of this study was to investigate the leadership experiences of female school leaders, the qualitative, descriptive paradigm is most suitable. Therefore, participants were selected through purposeful sampling, data were collected in situ through semi-structured interviews, and the analysis techniques of manual coding and the Leximancer (Smith, 2000) text mining software were utilised.

Participants. The employment of a 'stratified purposeful sampling' technique (Llewellyn, Sullivan & Minichiello, 2004) informed the selection of participants. In addition, the study was informed by the meta-analysis on gender and leadership style completed by Eagly, Karau and Johnson (1992) which confirms the value of exploring gender differences through targeting a small number of carefully selected participants. Four late career school-based leaders were invited to participate as they represented diverse personal and professional experiences of rural school leadership. The four late-career school leaders interviewed were:

- Catherine: Catherine was a primary school principal for the last fifteen years of her career. At the beginning of her career, Catherine taught in a rural school for four years and then was appointed as an assistant principal in a large city school for twelve years, before returning, as principal, to a country school. Throughout her career, Catherine gained extensive experience teaching and leading in rural and remote schools. Catherine's location presented as the most geographically isolated of all the women interviewed. For the majority of her career as a teacher and educational leader, Catherine had sole responsibility for her child with special needs.
- Eleanor: Eleanor was a primary school principal for twelve years. She had early career experience teaching in metropolitan schools; however, the majority of her teaching was in rural and regional settings. Eleanor is married to another principal and together they raised two children while balancing their respective leadership careers in a variety of rural educational settings.
- Rhonda: Rhonda's senior leadership role was as a secondary school Head Teacher. She taught in NSW government schools for 35 years, with the last ten years as a Head Teacher of Personal Development Health and Physical Education. Rhonda is married to a retired leading teacher and together they raised three children. She was a vigilant advocate for one of her children who has profound hearing loss.
- Denise: Denise began teaching as a pre-school teacher, and subsequently became the Director of a K-6 school for Indigenous students, located in a regional centre. Denise is an Aboriginal woman who married a leading international sporting figure and raised four children while becoming a fully accredited teacher and principal. She pioneered culturally appropriate educational provisions for Indigenous students in her community.

Site. All interviews were conducted in the same rural centre. This location was chosen because it was most convenient for the participants in terms of travel. Two researchers were present for each interview. One researcher posed the research questions, while the other took field notes. All interview data were recorded, transcribed, and later manually coded for emerging themes. In order to provide a triangulation of results, the interview data were then analysed using the Leximancer (Smith, 2003) text mining software. Themes and concepts surfaced during these analyses.

Interview/Research Questions. The following 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?

Analysis. The interview data will be manually coded and then analysed through Leximancer. Leximancer (Smith, 2000) is a software text-analysing tool that is used to identify "emergent concept groups that are referred to as themes" (Smith & Humphreys, 2006, p. 264). This software allows for further coding of major themes and concepts. As defined by the Leximancer manual (Smith, 2005), concepts are considered to be "collections of words that generally travel together throughout the text" (p. 28). Themes that emerge from the Leximancer software are identified within a 'concept list' and presented in hierarchical order from most associated to least associated. The strength of the themes

can be determined using the 'absolute count' tool, which refers to the number of times concepts are found in the text.

In addition, Leximancer generates data in the form of graphs that show clusters of concepts. These clusters are represented as circles, which are referred to as 'theme circles'. The size, colour and 'nearness' of theme circles to each other indicate the pattern of their relationship as derived from the data. Additionally, the brighter the colour outlining the concept circle on the graph, the more frequently that concept appeared in responses. The use of the Leximancer software complements manual coding and provides a method of triangulating the findings from the interview data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three research/interview questions frame the discussion of the results of this study. Firstly, the issue of accelerated leadership is explored, followed by a description of the late career leaders' styles of leadership. This section concludes with the interviewees' views on gender issues and their impact on opportunities to lead in rural schools. In each case, the themes that emerged from the interview responses are presented, followed by the Leximancer.

1. Accelerated Leadership Opportunities

(Have you experienced opportunities to lead in rural schools in an accelerated timeframe?)

Catherine reported that she had not experienced accelerated progression on a personal level, but she had observed it offered to others on more than one occasion, particularly for merit positions. She reported that in her experience men experienced more opportunities for accelerated progression than women. She related a powerful personal example that described the promotion of a male teacher from a classroom teacher's role to principal in three years.

Denise said that she became the head of a pre-school after she achieved her university degree, and that the previous pre-school director sanctioned her appointment. She did not view her leadership roles as being attained in an accelerated time frame. She indicated that her progression was seen as appropriate as she was qualified and had extensive experience.

As with Catherine and Denise, Eleanor reported that she did not experience accelerated progression. Her application for a leadership position in a large school was successful due to her experience and postgraduate qualifications. In contrast, Rhonda indicated that she had experienced accelerated progression when she took up the offer of a consultant's role early in her career. The professional development gained in this role assisted her to learn diverse skills and to come to her own position on leadership, informed by theory.

In summary, both Catherine and Eleanor reported they had not experienced the progression into formal leadership roles in an accelerated timeframe, however, Catherine had observed instances of this type of career trajectory. From the four interviewed women, Rhonda was the only one who reported that she had personally experienced accelerated progression into a formal leadership role.

LEXIMANCER RESULTS FOR ACCELERATED LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

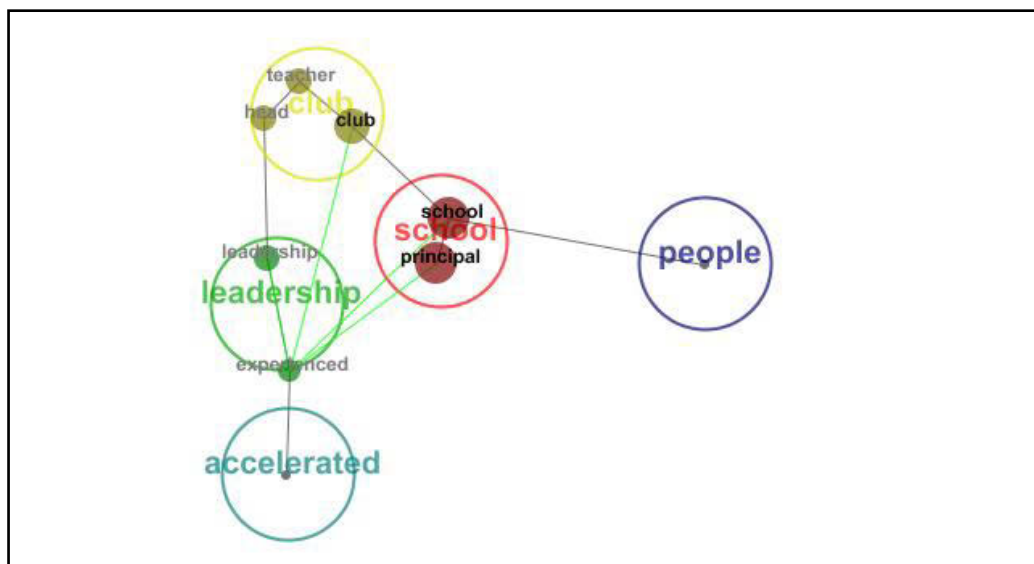
The interview data related to this question were entered into the Leximancer (Smith, 2000) text mining software. The results confirmed those found through manual coding. Four dominant themes were identified:

- *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%) appearing 6 times in the data set from the four interviews. The relationship between the dominant themes is shown in the Leximancer concept map (Figure 1). The diagram derived from the four participants' responses 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 data set in response to this question.

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



Two arguments can be deduced from the arrangement of the concepts in the central part of the map and from the interview data. Firstly, 'school' has been mentioned in different ways and connected with 'principal' and 'head' concepts many times. 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 and 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 then doesn't care what happens to get there and he gets in as one of the boy's club". It is clear from the responses made by the female leaders interviewed that they perceived that men had experienced accelerated progression into formal leadership roles more than women. The next section reports on the respondents' views of their own leadership styles.

2. Leadership Style (How do you characterise your style of leadership?)

There was a strong indication from three of the four respondents in this study that they considered their leadership styles to be primarily collaborative. In this context, teamwork was a hallmark of the working style of the four female school leaders. They all indicated that they work with staff and students in their schools using a team approach. Furthermore, two of the female leaders in the study agreed that working in a collaborative style is a better match for them than using an authoritative style.

In her interview, Catherine stated that she was working in collaboration with staff, students and parents. She indicated that her style of leadership was collaborative and innovative. In addition, she considered herself 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 collaborative, not authoritative nor "bossy".

In contrast, Denise indicated that the enactment of her style of leadership emerged from the environment that she experienced as a child. During the interview she told a deeply personal story

about her grandfather and his reaction when welfare officers came in one day and put up a fence around the mission². She said, "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 employ a consistently emancipatory style of leadership within her working life, she would never get a positive result from her endeavours.

Denise reflected that when she later became the director and principal of a primary school, she encouraged everybody in the school, as well as the parents, to "contribute to their circle" and work together as a team. She emphasised her belief in the importance of this structure for Aboriginal people, so that everyone can "develop their own self esteem and enjoy the encouragement of being a team player". Under her leadership, Denise wanted all of her staff members to take part and to be able to talk together in her pre-school and in her school.

Eleanor 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 manifest through her analysis of data or through conversation with others in order to network and work towards attaining goals. Eleanor said that she "was always a great observer of what works and what doesn't work". She arrived at her leadership style through observation, being informed by the work of researchers like Michael Fullan, and by modelling herself on the behaviour of successful people. She has remained involved in professional learning throughout her career through her own tertiary studies and by selecting strategically from the programs provided by the NSW Department of Education and Communities.

Likewise, Rhonda worked with her staff members as "a team leader". She describes herself as a "democratic" person who likes to work 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, at the same time, encouraging her staff to work as a team. Rhonda insisted that she didn't deal with coworkers as an authoritative "boss" would. Instead, Rhonda arrived at her leadership style through being a "mentor" to others and by passing on to her workmates the same benefits she had gained from her networking opportunities and professional learning experiences.

Overall, the interview data from Catherine revealed that she worked using a collaborative and innovative style of leadership. Like her fellow interviewees, she favoured teamwork as a key component of her leadership style. Similarly, Denise saw herself as always working as a member of a team. Importantly, she designed her style of leadership from within the cultural environment in which she was raised. Eleanor also considered that she worked with teachers as part of a team. Her style of leadership was characterised as collaborative, with Eleanor reporting that she felt she was a great observer and developed ways of knowing what would work best for her staff and the school. Rhonda, echoing the other interviewees, also stated that she always preferred working as part of a team. She agreed with Catherine that working in a collaborative style was better than using an authoritative style to get things done. In her interview, Rhonda stressed the importance of learning from people and being a "mentor". These findings are aligned with the work of Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) who suggest that collaborative and innovative style of leadership can lead to positive outcomes for children in the early childhood education settings.

² *Mission* is a term for Aboriginal settlements established by Christian groups in the early 1900's to 1950's depending on the location within Australia. These were designed to assist Aboriginal people, but there are various accounts of misuse or abuse of the indigenous people at the hands of the well-meaning clergy on missions, reserves or stations.

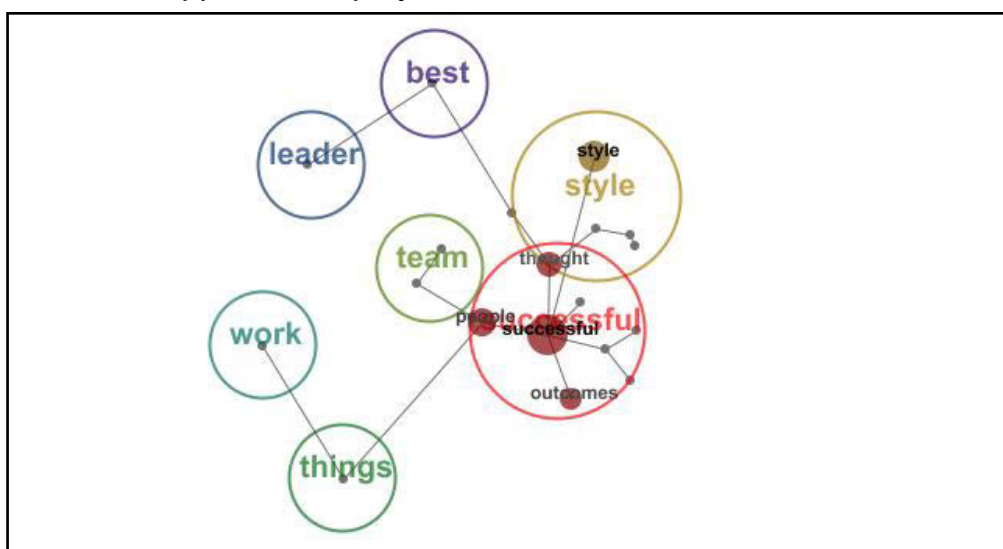
LEXIMANCER RESULTS FOR LEADERSHIP STYLE

The Leximancer analysis of the interview data related to leadership style resulted in the identification of following four dominant themes:

- *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. The brightest circle evident in Figure 2 contains the term 'successful'. In this 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. The locational proximity on the map signifies semantic and argumentative nearness, which in this case positions the concepts 'successful' and 'style' in the centre of the map. This positioning is consistent with the manual coding of the interviews with the 'successful' cluster overlapping with the 'style' cluster in Figure 2.

Figure 2: *Thematic map for leadership style*



Two arguments can be deduced from the combination of the Leximancer concept map and the interview data. Firstly, during their interviews female leaders repeated the word 'successful' many times. For example, Catherine said that she arrived at her style of leadership through studying examples of "successful leaders". As shown in Figure 2, the cluster group inside the circle defining 'successful' includes 'successful' (100%), 'thought' (100%), 'people' (67%) and 'outcomes' (45%). Secondly, the leadership style employed, particularly the collaborative style, was mentioned in answer to this question by Catherine, Eleanor and Rhonda. Their leadership styles were described as collaborative. They arrived at their ways of working through their experiences of working with other successful leaders. This explanation begins to illuminate the overlap between 'successful' and 'style' evident in the Leximancer analysis.

3. Leadership Opportunities for Men and Women (In your opinion, are opportunities for leadership different for men and women?)

In response to the third interview question, Catherine said that such leadership opportunities can be equal for men and women, but stressed that her observations were based on her experience in primary schools (K-6), where 70% of all teachers were female and 30% were male. She noted curiously however, that 70% of leaders were males and only 30% of leaders were females in this same primary school context and questioned this disparity.

Denise reported that males and females can be equally successful in leadership positions in her opinion. From her observations Denise did not see one gender as being more advantaged than the other in terms of available opportunities for taking on leadership roles. Denise did note, however, that in terms of pre-schools for Indigenous students, there are mostly women in all leadership positions

In answer to this question, Eleanor indicated that she had thought deeply about this, and she had concluded that there is a difference. Over the last 40 years Eleanor reported that she had known of many cases where men became principals quickly. On the other hand, many hard-working women stayed in assistant principal positions. She observed that often, "Men enjoy the more high profile jobs and women are working behind them".

Rhonda agreed that in her experience there are more men in leadership positions. She stated that she understands this because she considers that men expect that they will be leaders and are less likely to stay satisfied as followers. From her observations, men want their point of view to be heard and consequently accept being school leaders when they have the opportunity. In Rhonda's opinion, women need to work very hard to be in leadership positions and are more reluctant to take on such roles that may conflict with their family responsibilities.

In summary, Catherine, Eleanor and Rhonda held the same view that women are underrepresented and need to work hard to be in leadership positions. This finding is reflected by other research such as that conducted by Tett and Riddell (2009) which found that male teachers recognized that "their status as men gave them greater authority than their female counterparts" (p. 488). The male teachers in Tett and Riddell's (2009) study reported being groomed for promotion and expected to progress to leadership roles. From a contrasting perspective, Denise thought that males and females are given equal opportunities to be in leadership positions. Denise's views are in contrast to those of other Indigenous women in leadership roles (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2006).

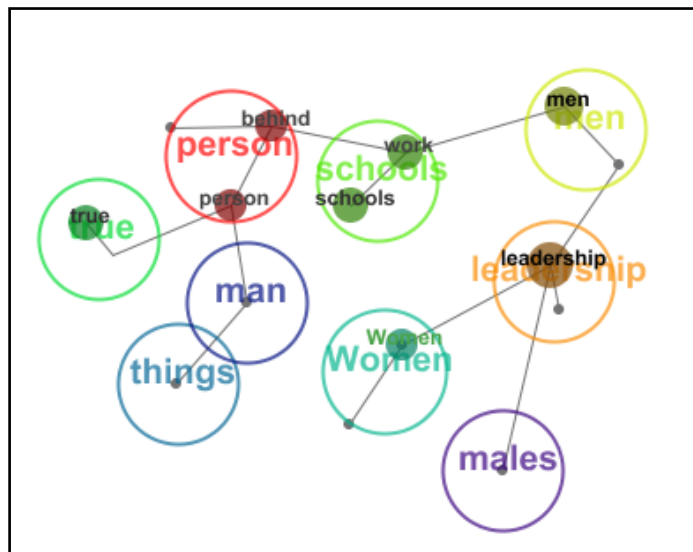
LEXIMANCER RESULTS FOR LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEN AND WOMEN

Further investigation of the interview data through Leximancer confirmed the results of manual coding. Four dominant themes were evident:

- *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 in Figure 3. The brightest circle is related to the concept of 'person'. Concepts that appear nearest to each other are 'person', 'leadership', 'schools' and 'true'.

Figure 3: Thematic map for equality of leadership positions based on gender



In interpreting this Leximancer map, two insights can be deduced from the concepts in the centre of the diagram. Firstly, the four interviewed female leaders used the word ‘person’ in different ways, but primarily in relation to characteristics of a “person” – whether the person is “career-driven”, a “good person”, a “family person” or a “school person”. For example, Catherine reported: “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 close relation to the concepts of ‘men’ and ‘leadership’. This reflects the content of the interviews in which three of the four interviewed female leaders agreed that more males than females were provided with leadership opportunities during their careers. For example, Eleanor stated that, “I thought about this a lot and I thought it was true”. In her interview, Catherine added that, “It seems very true actually, that men are given more opportunities”.

Overall, the interview data analysed provides strong evidence that all of the female leaders in this study preferred to work with their staff, students and parents as members and sometimes leaders of a team. Three of the interviewed women reported that they identify themselves as using collaborative styles of leadership in their schools. One interviewee described her approach as emancipatory.

In this analysis, Leximancer results expanded the understanding of the data found through manual coding. For example, there appears to be a link between the females’ style of leadership and notions of what the women interviewed consider successful leadership. Evidence of this link is that a number of these women explicitly remember arriving at their style of leadership through observing examples of other successful leaders, often other women already in leadership roles. All the interviewed female school leaders, for example, talked of school leaders they admired and agreed that women in leadership roles appeared to evidence greater empathy, were more caring about their school-aged students, and expressed a greater range of emotions as leaders. In short, all four late-career leaders identified that women in their experiences were more empathetic and more likely to work in a shared way and collaborate better in teams than their male colleagues.

As suggested by Hall (1996, cited in Bush & Coleman, 2008), research focusing on female head teachers and principals in the USA, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada appears to conclude that many female managers work in a co-operative style. Bush and Coleman (2008) also indicate that women employ this kind of leadership style that privileges teamwork and collaboration. In the light of these findings, it appears that this study can also conclude that the successful and experienced female school leaders interviewed here identify with a collaborative style of school leadership. Specifically, the interviewees reported a style of leadership, which they described as collaborative and which foregrounded teamwork and emancipatory strategies.

Overall, this research aimed to investigate female leadership in rural schools from a career-span perspective. In previous research, early career teachers reported many opportunities to view, accept

and explore formal and informal leadership roles. Policy changes over recent years may be responsible for some early career women reporting Self-perceptions, social expectations and socialization factors may also be other explanations. The four late-career leaders interviewed here, however, provide a valuable snapshot of their experiences of leadership opportunities. For these more experienced women, their careers were not marked by rapid transitions into leadership, but characterised by a more measured and sustained platform of significant teaching experience prior to moving on to leadership positions. For them, instead of the bush school offering a fast track to promotion opportunities, it has meant the slow road of building collaborative leadership skills throughout their careers.

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