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*The Leadership Of Six Women Secondary Principals  
In A New Right Environment*

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis was to explore and describe the early socialisation and leadership practice of six women secondary school principals, working and living in the same provincial area of New Zealand. This study had three broad aims: to explore firstly, the early socialisation and “influential personal and professional experiences” leading each of the participants to their principalships; secondly, the “reality” of being a woman secondary school principal and, thirdly, the “impact of New Right educational reforms” on their school leadership practice.

The changes initiated by the Tomorrow’s Schools (1988) educational reforms have deeply impacted on New Zealand schooling. The decentralisation of many government administrative functions to school boards of trustees, in addition to the withdrawal of many government support services, is considered to have had a profound effect on the workloads and stress levels of principals and teachers (Palmer, 1997). Many critics of the reforms (Codd *et al*, 1990) believe that the increased emphasis on accountability and efficiency in education may be in direct conflict with collaborative school leadership initiatives.

This qualitative, case study research sought to achieve its aims by exploring the ways in which six women secondary principals approach school leadership in 1998 and those values supporting their leadership action. While the research sample is placed against a backdrop of six differing school cultures and class constituencies, data illustrate several common leadership themes woven throughout the research. In adopting a life-history (Middleton, 1986, Acker, 1989) approach, this study analyses early life experiences and how these “shaped” the participants as women. Circumstances and situations, regarded by the participants as influential and resulting in decisions directly impacting on their respective career paths, are also explored.

This study illustrates that five of the six women adopted a “holistic” view (Neville, 1988) of their career development and meandered to their principalships, always mindful of personal events in their lives. They describe accepting opportunities rather than formally adopting linear career plans. Data show that the women have always held a commitment to being high quality teachers, with four principals continuing to have direct classroom contact.

The principals employed values of inclusion, collaboration, care and empowerment, underpinned by a very strong determination and “inner locus of control”, to make a positive difference to the lives of their staff and students. There is an increasing body of literature about women in educational leadership, written exclusively by women (Neville, 1988, Blackmore, 1989, Shakeshaft, 1989, Strachan, 1997, Adler *et al*, 1993, Hall, 1996). This thesis will add to that literature and provides six further role models for women following in their footsteps.

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