

Co-Principalship: Are Two Heads Better Than One?

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Abstract

The traditional model of school principal is of one individual vested with sole authority and accountability. This model has come under increasing scrutiny, particularly over the last two decades. Globally, accounts of principal attrition and a scarcity of applicants for principal vacancies have become more common resulting in an examination of alternative models of principalship as solutions to the leadership crisis. In Catholic secondary schools in Victoria, Australia, the model of co-principalship has been proposed as a possible solution to this reported crisis. In this article, the feasibility of co-principalship as a model of school leadership is examined, drawing on a research study into the tensions of principalship and possible reconceptualisations of the role. The article commences with an overview of the current educational milieu, reports on the views of current principals regarding their role and their view of co-principalship and concludes with a discussion of co-principalship as a panacea for imputed principal dissatisfaction.

1. Introduction

Work intensification and school reform were two characteristics of the 20th century educational milieu, both nationally and globally, and they continue to be topical issues in the 21st century. In Victoria, Australia, the devolution of management from centralised systemic offices to individual schools placed pressure on principals, requiring new business management skills in addition to the skills of educational leadership, and lead to the feeling that principals were now ‘executives in artificially constructed corporations’ [1]. Across all Victorian educational systems, principals are expected to develop the corporate skills of marketing, entrepreneurship and public relations [2] as they strive to meet the challenges of more stringent and more numerous accountability measures, escalating market competitiveness (driven at the local level by greater parental choice), the demands of a technological society, accompanied by a knowledge revolution, and an increasingly global world. Leading schools in this environment is more testing

than ever and, played out in the public arena as it is, principalship has become high stakes [3].

In this high stakes arena, the argument has been made that principals need to be super-heroes to successfully manage myriad expectations and accountabilities [4]. One particular portrait of principalship is painted by comments such as: “In order to attract leaders ... selection criteria .. ensure that the successful person can both walk on water and change it into wine” [5] and “Leadership within the present international policy context has become a growth industry. Politicians demand more of it, academics decry the lack of it, and potential school leaders are deciding ‘to hell with it’ ” [6]. These are arguably negative views of the role of school principal and raise questions about what is it in the principal’s role that requires someone to be a superhero. It is also a portrait that is indicative of the tensions, particularly emotional tensions, involved in being a principal. Leadership as emotional labour has been discussed by many researchers who argue that the emotional nature of the work of principal is often unacknowledged [7], [8], [9], [10].

In contrast are the titles such as ‘The Best of Jobs, the Worst of Jobs’ [11], ‘The Privilege and the Price’ [12] and ‘It’s a Tough Job, but Rewards are Boundless’ [13] which paint a less negative, more balanced picture of the role. Collectively, the combined portraits present a more ambivalent perspective of the profession of school principal: that the position is both loved and hated; that there are times when principals feel isolated and unappreciated, and others where they are certain that there are rewards; that principals sometimes feel overwhelmed by the nature of the work that they do.

This highly charged situation is perceived to have led to a crisis in leadership with high rates of principal attrition being reported globally and also a shortage of people willing to come forward to fill the vacancies. It has become progressively more apparent that the traditional view of one principal to one school, as the only approach to school leadership, is not sustainable. In Australia, the need for a reconceptualising of the role of principal has been flagged [14], [15], [16] and, in the Victorian Catholic system, an existing model of co-principalship (albeit only present in a few schools) has come under scrutiny as a possible solution to

both principal burnout and applicant scarcity. The raises the question of whether co-principalship is a viable alternative to sole principalship’.

2. The co-principalship model

Co-principals were first initiated in Brigidine schools in the late 1980s when the Religious principal of one of the Order’s secondary schools chose to change the way in which she led her school and introduce shared authority and accountability through the appointment of a co-principal. While the introduction of co-principalship may have eased some of the burdens of principalship, it was introduced more to provide an example of shared leadership in keeping with the Brigidine charism of social justice.

In Brigidine schools, co-principalship involves joint responsibility between the two principals, with an understanding that all aspects of school leadership are shared. While there may be times when functions are split, usually to facilitate attendance at multiple events or to cover when one co-principal is absent, the normal operation of decision-making and consultation would have the involvement of both co-principals. This model is not the only model of co-principalship to have been explored in schools [17], [18], [19], [20]. Other models of co-principalship have been trialled where the co-principals have particular, but not generally overlapping, functions (e.g. curriculum leadership and administrative leadership) or where the co-principals take responsibility for particular sections of the school (e.g. Junior Secondary and Senior Secondary).

The Brigidine model of co-principalship currently exists in two Catholic secondary schools in Victoria, with a principal of each gender in the shared position, but this latter arrangement has not always been the case in other schools where the structure has existed in the past. Although the Brigidine Order has supported and promoted the co-principalship model for many years, the model not only has not been embraced on any widespread scale beyond the schools governed by this order, but also within Brigidine schools the number of schools where this particular leadership structure is in use has declined.

Against this overall trend, within the Eucalyptus Diocese, co-principalship is being encouraged as a workable model for the future and advertisements for both secondary and primary principal positions have allowed for expressions of interest from those who would like to be part of such a leadership structure. Indeed, a new P-9 college was established in 2005 with co-principals, although the model used there was one where, although officially the co-principals have shared responsibility, the choice was made to delineate specific areas (primary and secondary) of organisational responsibility.

3. The research study

3.1. The participants

To establish what the tensions of principalship actually are, to determine whether serving principals believed that there was a need to reconceptualise the role of the Catholic secondary school principal and also to ascertain whether co-principalship was seen as a viable alternative, five principals within the Diocese of Eucalyptus (all identifying names have been replaced with pseudonyms. were invited to participate in a research study. The researcher was also a principal within the diocese and a co-participant in the research. The principals were chosen specifically to provide a broad range of contexts including the size and location of the schools, the structure of the principalship and the age, experience and gender of the principal.

Bridget was principal of Alpha College, Acacia, a co-educational 7-12 parish school of approximately 800 students. Acacia is a large regional city with an expanding population. Bridget had been a principal for two and a half years and had just completed her first principal review. She was 38 years old when she took up this role, her first as principal. Prior to principalship, Bridget had been a coordinator in a different school and had also worked within the Catholic Education office as an Education Officer.

Mary had held the position of principal for five and a half years at Beta College in Banksia, a small tourist town. The population of the town was increasing and there were talks of the school changing from a 7 - 10 to a 7 - 12 college. She was a young principal, having been about 32 when she took on the role, and also had significant family commitments. Mary had come to the role of principal after a different leadership role in a large urban school.

Patrick had been principal of Gamma College in Hakea, a large regional centre, for 13 years. The college is a Congregational 7-12 co-educational school and has approximately 1200 students. In his late 50s, Patrick is an experienced principal with a range of other positions behind him.

More unusual in the world of principalship, Teresa and Thomas were co-principals of another congregation owned school, this time administered by the Brigidine Sisters. Delta College is another 7 - 12 co-educational school, having 700 students, in Boronia, a rural city with a major tourist industry. Thomas had been a deputy in a college in the Diocese of Eucalyptus, but left the diocese to take up the role of principal in a Catholic secondary college in New South Wales. He returned to Eucalyptus when one of the co-principals at Delta College retired. Teresa came to the diocese as one of the inaugural co-principals, sharing the position with Paul who had been principal of the college for five

years, as a sole principal, prior to that. Both Teresa and Thomas were in their late 40s when they first took on a role as a principal.

3.2. Methodology

The methodology used was that of critical narrative inquiry [21], [22]. Storied accounts told by principals about their work (work narratives) were analysed and examined within and against other discourses of the work of the principal. In this approach, accounts of practice and theoretical and policy accounts were used together to open up spaces for interpretation and critical analysis of principals' work. Initial interviews were only semi-structured, starting from the opening question: 'What is your experience of being a principal'? They were dialogic in nature, with the researcher entering into a conversation about principalship with each participant and allowing the topics to range where the participant wished. These interviews were contextually analysed for emerging themes such as evidence of stress and/or frustration, role confusion and the impact of external forces and conceptions on positioning the performance of principals' work in particular ways. Follow-up interviews with each principal were more focused, with more specific questions promoting more in-depth discussion of the emergent themes. Principals were also asked in this second interview about their views on reconceptualising the role. While co-principalship was discussed as a possible model, given the diocesan thrust for co-principals, participants were free to discuss other reconceptualisations.

4. Reflections from the data

The participant interviews, which were analysed for common themes, supported reports from the literature that principalship can be an emotional task [8], [9], [10] giving rise to ambivalent attitudes [11], [12]. The data also provided a range of views about co-principalship as a preferred model of principalship. Analysis of the data revealed that their views could be considered within three broad questions:

- i. Is the Brigidine model of co-principalship a preferred model for change?
- ii. What conditions might be required for a successful co-principalship?
- iii. Is co-principalship a panacea for the tensions of sole principalship?

4.1. How is principalship viewed?

The narratives of the principals who joined with me in my research have provided the palette from which it has been possible to paint a portrait of the work of the Catholic secondary school principal. It is

work that is both loved and hated, and which is undoubtedly fraught with tensions for those who inhabit the role, with a major tension being that holding this position often means that the principal essentially does "inhabit" the role, that the position and the person become almost inextricably entwined. This conflation of principal and role can also lead to isolation - the sense of being alone even if leading a very large school and being constantly surrounded by hundreds of people.

Mary felt quite strongly the pressures of role/person conflation, stating that in her situation, where being the mother of a young family added its own pressure, she felt that the community, both parental and wider, was not willing to afford her a private life. She described the situation as "*you are public property ...there's no sense at all that I get that people are making any attempt at all to delineate between my role as principal and my personal space. And I don't see any attempt to make it at all*".

Bridget also intimated that the all-embracing nature of the role was a source of tension such that "*the balance in my life is not always good as far as having a life beyond the principalship*" and that this affected her to the point that she was thinking "*that the role is so intense and so full on that I'm not sure that I could be the person I need to be in the long term and stay healthy ... I still can't see myself in this job in ten years time like some people*".

In terms of the research, Bridget's statement about not sustaining the role over the long term was the most extreme response to the pressures of the position, but Mary also commented that she did not necessarily see herself continuing as a principal, but nor did she 'write off' this as a possibility.

The other principals interviewed were quite categorical about their intentions to remain principals, either by remaining in their current schools or actively seeking a principalship elsewhere. The unanimous view of the role was that it was one which could be very rewarding and also one which could cause major stress, both emotional and physical.

4.2. Is the Brigidine model of co-principalship a preferred model for change?

"*A lot of the tensions and stresses in being a principal come with everything coming on you and you don't really have anyone else to share the totality of what's going on. ... [As a co-principal] you never feel as if you're out on your own*" (Thomas). For Thomas, the advantages of co-principalship are clear: sharing all aspects of school leadership far outweighs 'going it alone'. It is evident that it is very different in structure from the traditional leadership role of the single principal who is solely accountable for everything, and who may or

may not share leadership with others, and that it may mitigate the feeling of being “lonely at the top” [23]. If Thomas is to be believed, there could be an attraction in co-principalship both for those who currently undertake the work of principal and also those who currently look at the work and consider it too onerous or too intrusive into one’s personal life, deterrents indicated in research reports [12], [24].

However, to accept uncritically that the way in which principal leadership occurs in the Brigidine model of co-principalship is what defines co-principalship and also that it is the best reconceptualisation of the principalship is presumptuous. The two co-principals in the study certainly believed that distinctions should be made based on how responsibilities are shared. Teresa, in discussing how her co-principalship, where all duties are shared, differed from that at Sigma College, where the responsibilities are apportioned, stated “*I think that ... our emphasis really is on ‘co’ whereas the Sigma model I believe is ‘dual’*” and Thomas made the same distinction, describing that “*dual is a different connotation, where you talk about pigeonholing rather than co- working together*”. And yet, this view of co-principalship, where everything is shared, was not necessarily the preferred view of the other participants. In fact, when asked about this construction of the co-principalship, Mary argued: “*I can’t see any benefit whatsoever in two people doing the one job. I can see absolutely no benefit. I think different people have different skills in different areas and if I was to enter into a professional relationship with someone else as a co-principal ... I would hope that they would be complementary and that because of that certain areas could be perhaps individual ones*”.

This view leans more towards the model as practised by the Sigma College principals, rather than the Brigidine model.

In yet another divergence from the Brigidine model of co-principalship, two of the other participants, both of whom work within a sole principal model of principalship, with two deputy principals with whom they work very closely, commented that they felt that their leadership practice of close association with the deputy principals was akin to co-principalship. Bridget’s comment that “*whilst it’s a bit of a false situation with my two deputies, I think at different times we almost operate out of that collegiate, co-principal model and we share a lot of the responsibilities around*” was, in part, reflected by Patrick’s reflection on working with his two deputies:

“we’ve been very much a team the last four years, and having very supportive deputies and working as a unit has been very rewarding”. However, as stated by Bridget, there was recognition that “*of course it can never be a real co-principalship if they’re*

paying me however much more and if the buck stops with me”.

While the view that such a ‘team’ model of principal work is similar to co-principalship begs the questions of both where the final authority lies and of the salary scale of deputies in comparison to principals, it seems apparent that both formal and informal moves are being made to adopt alternative models of leadership, but not necessarily principalship.

The value of the Brigidine model of co-principalship, as a recommendation for change, will be examined further in the conclusion, as will the possibilities of other models of shared leadership as ‘solutions’ to some of the tensions of the principal’s role. However, regardless of the particular model proposed, shared leadership is not something that is automatically feasible for any given group of people to work within. Certain conditions need to be met.

4.3. What conditions might be required for a successful co-principalship?

Teresa was quite definitive in explaining the need for careful selection of a co-principal, something which she believes that the Brigidines generally do well. It was imperative, Teresa felt, because “*you couldn’t have two people who are in such a way that you’d be wiping the blood off the walls after they’ve had a day’s work*”. However, the participants in the study did not feel that it was necessary that two people working together as co-principals be identical in all ways. Mary, as well as being adamant that there was no point in two people doing one job, also felt that any co-principal that she might work with should be “*someone whose skills, areas of expertise, attitudes, ways were very different from mine*”. Mary’s hope, however, that the two people “*would be complementary*” was echoed both in Thomas’s comment that “*you’ve got to have the right sort of person to work with and they’ve obviously got to work out of exactly the same operating and ethos base because if you were poles apart then it wouldn’t be harmonious in any shape or form*” and also in Teresa’s response to a question about the need for a common philosophy, where she stated: “*in terms of your philosophy of how you interact, I’m talking about the people space stuff, I don’t think it would be very workable if one person was an absolute black and white person and the other one very much more into grey spaces so there’s got to be a meeting point on that sort of thing*”.

So, what requirements might be needed to prevent the need for *wiping the blood off the walls*? One requirement has already been alluded to: the need for compatibility of ethos. This view is supported in a discussion of a “leadership couple” at Timbertop, where their working relationship “was enshrouded in a reciprocal moral unity” [25]. In a Catholic school it

would not be harmonious to have one principal who approached all issues dealing with Church (e.g. discipline, church attendance, teacher lifestyle) from a fundamentalist base and the other from a liberal viewpoint.

There would also need to be some similarity in terms of philosophy on issues such as dealing with difficult people and leadership style. While the latter has some room for complementarity, a co-principal working from an authoritarian stance might well not be able to work with a colleague working in a consensus mode. This need for commonality was pointed out by Thomas when he stated that, in the co-principalship at his own school, *“most importantly we have a similar way of dealing with people and I guess that underpins all our decision making and so we often, in the absence of one of us the other one can really imagine in most cases about what direction would be the best way if we both had made it”*.

This is supported in a discussion of co-principalship in another school where the co-principals *“both recognised their differences and respected them, but had enough overall consensus about the aims of the school and its educational philosophy”* [18]

Given the need for such high degrees of commonality of philosophy and complementarity of working styles, finding the right co-principal requires considerable discernment and also a period of formation prior to taking up the appointment. The possible candidates need to spend enough time together to allow for evaluation of compatibility. This would certainly require considerable system support, something which the Brigidine Order have done with their own appointments and a condition which has been flagged for systems considering the introduction of co-principalship: *“the Brigidine Stewardship Council commits to ensuring that the structure works well. ... It is this level of support ... which is crucial to the success of the model. Unless Catholic Education Offices and Diocesan authorities were able to provide similar levels of support to co-principals in Diocesan secondary schools, the research team questions how effective the model might be in these settings”* [26].

In the light of these discussions, is co-principalship a way forward?

4.4. Is co-principalship a panacea for the tensions of sole principalship?

The co-principals who participated in this study were very definitely of the opinion that co-principalship, as a model of principalship, is a far better option than the more traditional model of the sole principal. Both have worked in a sole principalship model, either as an appointed sole principal or as an acting principal of a school and

they categorically state that they would continue to pursue the model of co-principalship if the other one left. Thomas stated *“when you’re working with someone else there’s nothing too large that can’t be solved because there’s always someone to talk to about issues and so that diminishes the isolation factor”*. Teresa went on to add that *“you should certainly get wiser decisions out of the constant conversation and dialogue. It’s about shared wisdom I think and then within that shared wisdom there’s also a sense of a burden shared is a burden halved, I suppose”*. While Teresa was supportive of co-principalship as a sharing of role she did add that *“it’s one of the dimensions, but it’s not a reason for co-principalship”*. This positive experience of co-principalship has also been reported by other co-principals in the Brigidine system, who agree that *“co-principalship offers benefits in terms of sharing responsibility The sense of not carrying the burden of responsibility alone in major decisions and situations of difficulty is real and advantageous”* [27].

However, not everything about co-principalship is indicative of a successful transition from sole principalship, with its tensions, to a co-principalship model that will bring welcome relief and renewed optimism to the principal cohort. It has already been commented upon that co-principals must have some degree of personal compatibility and also a shared philosophy of education. The necessity for time for formation and testing of compatibility has also been commented on. The difference between the Brigidine model of co-principalship, where the couple meet and learn about each other before appointment, has also been shown to be different from the only other Catholic secondary school example of co-principalship, where the individuals concerned ‘own’ different tasks, and were also appointed as co-principals although they had not applied to work together. How, and whether, this latter example works is an area for further research, as it runs contrary to the belief espoused by the Brigidines and the view that *“it would be difficult for two people who had no experience of working with each other to be thrown together and expected to work co-operatively”* [27].

It is also becoming clearer that co-principalship, in the Brigidine model, where there is joint leadership in all areas, is not necessarily going to be possible in all cases. Teresa stated that *“it’s a great model if schools can financially sustain it, it’s a great model because of the notion of the shared wisdom, I keep coming back to that, it’s a great strength ... I think it’s a model to look at very seriously, but again there’s financial constraints”*. For some schools, financial constraints could be the ‘straw that breaks the camel’s back’, funding not allowing enough leeway to have two principals.

Another way in which co-principalship fails to address the reported tension of the traditional role of principal is in terms of excessive demands on time. It has been reported that “co-principalship does not save time; in fact, it may create the need to find additional time to discuss issues and form a collaborative response. Workload remains similar to that in a more traditional organisational setting” [27]. Time was also mentioned by Teresa, in this instance in relation to the time taken for decisions to be made. Teresa reported that staff, at times, felt that the time taken could be detrimental to the smooth running of the school and there were times, for her, when *“sometimes I could be sitting in the office and something will happen and I think oh, yeah, we’ll do it that way, and then you think, no, no, hang on, I’ve got to talk to Thomas about this”*.

While it is clear that there are some advantages to be gained from working in a co-principal or other shared leadership arrangement, and all of the participants advocate such leadership, there are also apparent difficulties inherent in making the move to such an alternative model. Furthermore, some of the reflections suggest that co-principalship is not automatically going to reduce the stresses and strains of being a principal. It is not necessarily going to mean that a problem shared is a problem halved and even a strong proponent of the model, Teresa, felt compelled to state *“it’s not a panacea. I see it as one model, which people have to enter into authentically because, while it’s a model of co-leadership or dual leadership as you’ve got at Sigma, it means that if I kick the bucket, Thomas has to take over, so the employment is on a clear understanding that you can be a stand alone principal if the other principal isn’t there”*. She also felt that there would not be a widespread adoption of the model even though she would like to see it happen. Responding to a suggestion that single principals might gradually be phased out and co-principals become the norm, Teresa said *“Come the revolution. Personally, I don’t think I’ll see it in my lifetime. I think that’s there’s a mindset out there and that doesn’t mean it’s a negative thing, it’s just tradition and conditioning”*.

Clearly, from the very small number of schools in the Catholic system that have adopted any form of co-principalship, it is apparent that Teresa’s view may be accurate. However, this research study did not demonstrate that there is a mind-set against co-principalship, but rather that some of the limitations such as greater cost, formation of the involved parties and sharing of all tasks rather than divided tasks may provide disincentives to this model. It is also important to note that Teresa was talking about a mindset within the context of the Catholic system. Given the patriarchal hierarchy of that Church it is possible that the mindset is more of acceptance from the wider system than from principals themselves.

5. Further Research

While several different models of reconceptualising the principalship are posited, the question ‘is a reconceptualisation necessary?’ has not been definitively answered. The five principals who were interviewed for this study were not united in their response to co-principalship (in the Brigidine model) becoming the norm. While Teresa and Thomas, the two principals working within this model, were unanimous about its benefits for them, Mary was much more lukewarm in her attitude, and Bridget and Patrick, while seeing some benefit, felt that their shared leadership model of themselves as principal plus a leadership team was just as effective. Even Teresa warned against a wholesale introduction of co-principalship within Victorian Catholic secondary schools. Comments such as *“it’s not a panacea”*, *“the time we take to make a decision”*, *“it’s not for everybody”*, *“there’s financial constraints”* and *“you couldn’t have two people in such a way that you’d be wiping the blood of the walls after they’ve had a day’s work”* do not inspire confidence in a successful and universally applicable model! Does this mean that there is no need to reconceptualise the role?

Each of the five principals worked in some form of shared leadership model. In Victorian Catholic secondary schools, shared leadership is the norm, with leadership teams existing in just about all of these schools, usually consisting of the principal, one or more deputy principals, and almost invariably the Religious Education Coordinator and the Curriculum Coordinator (although the actual designation of one or more of these roles might differ). Even Teresa and Thomas, who worked in the co-principalship model, had a leadership team. However, a leadership team model, where one or more principals still have ultimate responsibility for the school, does not really equate to a reconceptualisation of the principalship. Bridget and Patrick, while appreciating the support and work of their leadership teams, seemed quite happy to remain as sole principals in the traditional model.

As a sole principal, Mary was the person who most commented on the possible advantage of working in partnership with another person. However, she made it clear that co-principalship, where all duties are shared, was not for her. Rather she would find an advantage in dual principalship where the strengths of the two people are complementary. The difference in opinion lay in the fact that Mary was the principal of a small school. While she had a small leadership team, she did not have a maintenance worker or a bursar and found herself carrying out administrative duties that would be foreign to the other four principals.

One issue regarding the introduction of co-principalship, or any model of shared leadership, as

the norm for school leadership that seems to have been neglected is that so many sole principals are successful and enjoy what they do. While work intensification is undeniable, many principals thrive on what they do. It is clear that not all principals need to work within a different model of principalship and that many have support structures that allow them to lead the complex organisations that their schools have become.

It is clear that there needs to be much more in-depth research conducted into co-principalship as not just a possible model, but also as a sustainable model of principalship. As explained, the number of Brigidine schools with co-principals has dwindled and the reasons, while obviously known to a few, do not appear to be generally known. Even Teresa, a principal within the Brigidine group of schools, was unable to answer the question as to why schools had gone back to a single principal. If this model is to be seriously considered, the possible reasons for its demise need to be researched in order for them to be mitigated.

There is also the need for further research in order to examine the sustainability of the model across a range of settings. Teresa stated that there are financial constraints in having co-principals for both people receive 95% of the usual salary. In Teresa's and Thomas' school, both principals were also provided with a car, as a car is part of the principal's salary package in Victorian Catholic secondary schools. Principals in small schools already struggle due to lack of funding and resources. To have co-principals in small schools without some form of above-funding grant could be very difficult. Admittedly, there is generally no deputy principal when there are co-principals, but a deputy salary is less than 95% of a principal's! If this model is not sustainable in small schools, then it cannot really be introduced as the preferred model for all schools.

It is also imperative that research from other settings, with different principalship models, should be closely examined and that trials of different models be seriously undertaken where there are suitable schools and personnel. These models might include job-sharing of the principalship; principalship where there are divisions of leadership for specialised tasks (schools where this occurs for junior and senior school may be fertile ground for this investigation); and schools where the principal is the educational leader and the administration of the school is done by a business manager. As with further research into co-principalship, the issues of sustainability and cost would be important.

A vital recommendation from this research is that education systems permit a range of principalship models in their schools. Context is important, as has already been described in terms of small schools. However, context encompasses far more than just

size of school. With the reported shortage of women either in or applying for Catholic secondary school principalship in Victoria [24] it is also important that alternative models be encompassed that will encourage more women to apply for the role of principal. Job-sharing may well be an attractive model for women with families, a model that has been trialled successfully in various countries [17]

While alternative models of principalship are attractive to some, it is important to recognise that there are many successful sole principals who are making a difference in the lives of their school communities and who, contrary to some reports, enjoy what they are doing [28]. Cannon, arguing for shared leadership as the new paradigm, posits that the sole principal model is "primarily hierarchical ... essentially structured in the same way in most schools ... It's a one-size-fits-all paradigm" [16]. This may be the case, but this does not necessarily mean that it has to disappear completely. It would not be appropriate to 'throw out the baby with the bathwater'. I would recommend further research among incumbent principals who enjoy their work and who feel that they are not overwhelmed by the work or that they lead unbalanced lives as the way in which these principals work would lend alternative voices of 'at the chalk face' practitioners to the debate. It could also be advantageous to extend this research to include principals' families and their perceptions of the impact of the role on their lives

6. Conclusion

Given the ambivalence of some of the participating principals towards the adoption of the Brigidine model of co-principalship, as well as some concerns raised in the literature, it appears that there are as many constraints as advantages. All models of principalship, including job-sharing, teacher leadership collectives and task specialised co-principalship, are worthy of further consideration and research as possible approaches to reconceptualising the role of principal.

While the research on co-principalship is still relatively scarce in comparison to research on school leadership more generally, possibly because the number of institutions with co-principals is still comparatively low, there are studies appearing of different models of co-principalship such as a study of dual culture co-principalship in Chinese International Schools [20]. Interest is also demonstrated by the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services an extended annotated national and international literature review on part-time and job sharing principals and pre-school directors [29].

Ultimately, it is almost certain that no one model of principalship will ever suffice and it can be argued that there are inherent dangers in even attempting to

do this. Context is vital in how school leadership is envisioned because “one size does not fit all when it comes to reshaping schooling and schools” [18]. This means that the unique context of a particular school and the changing context over time of not only individual schools, but also education itself, will necessitate that anyone looking for possible directions in terms of school principalship will need to be flexible. The participants in this study understood this need for flexibility with Patrick arguing that “*you can’t ever say to change the role or make it more workable is going to be ‘this is what it is’ because your school and mine are so different, contextually it’s different*”. Mary also acknowledged that context makes a difference when she stated that there needs to be “*certain people for certain schools, and I would also say certain people for certain times in certain schools*”.

Perhaps the most telling final word in terms of whether co-principalship should be universally adopted as a model comes from Teresa, a keen supporter of the model, who nevertheless stated that “*there are some people who could not work in this style of leadership*”.

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