The growing school leadership crisis in Queensland schools: Is talent management a solution?

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Abstract

This paper is about the growing school leadership crisis in education. More specifically, it unpacks the circumstances contributing to the growing global crisis in attracting aspirants to the position of a school principal and how this challenge is further heightened in the Queensland Context. It is premised on theoretical understandings of social exchange theory, where identification and acknowledgement of, and investment into an individual will result in greater loyalty and obligation to the sponsor or an organisation. This paper outlines a proposed doctoral study in which it examines the role, talent management with an underpinning of social exchange theory, could positively influence the growing leadership crisis in Queensland schools. The paper positions the proposed research study by examining the challenges facing school principals, findings from previous international studies into principal preparation, conceptualising the principle of talent management, the role of talent management in increasing aspirant leadership pools and how talent management is currently placed in education.

A Looming Leadership Crisis

There is a leadership crisis looming in education (Williams & Morey, 2015). Finding suitable aspirants who want to lead a school as the principal is becoming more challenging (Ainley & Carstens, 2018; Cranston, 2007; Roza, Celio, Harvey, & Wishon, 2003) and the role of principal is becoming less attractive to qualified and suitable applicants (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2010; Fink & Brayman, 2004; McKenzie, Weldon, Rowley, Murphy, & McMillan, 2014). While not mandated that a teaching background is necessary, non-teaching candidates, no matter how successful in their existing occupation, are not seriously considered for positions as principals (Roza et al., 2003). Moreover, it is difficult for applicants from outside of education to demonstrate the necessary curriculum and pedagogical experience identified in selection criteria. The referral to aspirants, will therefore be defined as existing school teachers or other leaders in the school environment such as curriculum leaders or deputy leaders.

The leadership crisis is also compounded by an ageing population of principals (Cranston, 2007; Riley, 2012; Watterston, 2015) and less interest from school staff in filling the position of principal (Watterston, 2015). By 2016, 70% of Australia's approximately 10 000 principals reached retirement age (Riley, 2012), yet, of the 276 000 Australian teachers (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2016), only 1-2% intended to apply for a principal position between 2014 and 2017 (McKenzie et al., 2014). Principals are also only remaining in their initial role for three to five years (Rowland, 2017; The Wing Institute, 2018; Young & Fuller, 2009) and in some systems, such as the United States, as many as 11.5% are leaving the profession altogether (The Wing Institute, 2018).

The ability to attract qualified and suitable applicants to the role of principal is further compounded by the number of teachers leaving the workforce, between 40% - 50% of teachers are leaving the profession in the first five years following graduation (Gallant & Riley, 2014; McKenzie et al., 2014; Owen, Kos, & McKenzie, 2008; Queensland College of Teachers, 2013). This is a problems as the first five years of a teacher's career are the peak periods of leadership aspiration (Lacey, 2003; Williams & Morey, 2015). Lacey (2003) also identified the longer a teacher remains in the classroom, the less likely they are to aspire to leadership. This can be as high as a 50% decrease in the possible aspirant pool. The need to identify and support aspirants earlier in their career is a necessity (Watterston, 2015), yet, in Australia, there is an average teaching experience of 27 years, prior to obtaining a principal position (OECD, 2014). The age and teaching experience prior to taking up a principal position in Australia is a significant consideration. Of all OECD countries, only Japan and Korea have principals with an average greater length of experience as a classroom teacher, before taking on leadership. It is also important to note that Australian principals have the second longest period of service in other leadership positions of 10 years prior to principalship (OECD, 2014), resulting in the average age of principals nearing retirement age before commencement in the role.

Research has also identified several factors that have contributed to the unattractive nature of the role of principal. These include a lack of understanding about the varied and complex aspects of a principal's job; the perception that school leadership is inherited; the difficulty of transition from classroom teacher to principal; a lack of clear pathways for career progression; a disparity between the very high levels of responsibility and financial remuneration; and considerable variability among principal preparation programs (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2015; The Wing Institute, 2018; Queensland Teachers' Union [QTU], 2018).

Preparation for the complex role of a school principal

Education systems and sectors in Australia are aware that there is a need to address this leadership crisis and to improve the systemic issues such as understanding the complexity of the role of the principal and building the applicant pipeline (Cranston, 2007; Watterston, 2015).

The role of a school principal is becoming more challenging and complex with significant changes made to the role of the principal, particularly over the last three decades (Alhouti & Male, 2017; García-Garduno & Martínez-Martínez, 2013; Magee & Slater, 2013; Schleicher, 2012). There is a considerable difference between the work of a newly appointed principal and that of the retiring principal they replace (Abusham, 2018). The role has been made more challenging due to the degree of accountability to statutory authorities, parents, school communities and other stakeholders. The level and diversity of educational dilemmas has also contributed to the complexity of the role (Cardno, 2007; Schleicher, 2012). What is expected of a principal has also evolved significantly. The role is now more 'akin to that of a CEO' (Cranston, 2007, p. 110), with significant financial and human resource responsibilities.

To accommodate this expectation, the modern principal is required to build leadership acumen, a keen understanding of the social, political and relational dimensions within educational leadership (Churchley, Neufeld, & Purvey, 2013). Principals need to **manage** (responding to system demands, accountability, budgeting, resourcing, data management, manage student, staff and operational elements such as facilities) and **lead** (visioning, empowering others, cultural change, community building, developing partnerships, curriculum design) (Coronel & Fernandez, 2013; Cranston, 2007; Richardson, Watts, Hollis, & McLeod, 2016; Schleicher, 2012). Principals must have the skills to be resilient, highly adaptable to change, able to anticipate changes in the educational setting, have highly developed human and social resource management skills, and be open to non-traditional forms of leadership. Principals must be able to do all of this while collaborating with others, actively listening, understanding the cultural context of their school and community, display patience and humility, trust others and demonstrate trustworthiness and be egalitarian in their beliefs and actions (Wasonga & Murphy, 2007). In other words, the modern principal needs to be a renaissance leader (Webber & Scott, 2013).

Some systems have recognised this role for its complexity and shifted the leadership structure of the school to distribute this leadership among multiple leaders, rather than just the sole position of the principal (Roza et al., 2003). This has included employing specific leaders to share the burden of Human Resource Management, curriculum leadership and financial management. Brierly, Doyle, and Smith (2016), found though, that it is more often characterised by more roles, but not more

people. In one US school, they found that 40 new leadership roles had been created, but these had been filled by 35% of the teachers existing in the school. In another district, schools averaged 12 leadership positions for each principal. These roles mainly focused on instructional areas such as coaches, mentors, PLC leaders, year level chairs and department heads. While this is a shift in internal school governance, many education systems continue to advertise for and employ principals based on skills that were required decades earlier (Richardson et al., 2016).

To address this growing concern, a plethora of research has occurred over the previous two decades such as the 7 Systems Leadership Study (7SLS) and International Study of the Preparation of Principals (ISPP). These studies and others that have followed, consistently identified that this is a global challenge and that appropriate preparation is a key strategy to improving principal retention and engagement (Bush, 2018; Clarke & Wildy, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Manna, 2015; Webber & Scott, 2013).

Understanding and demystifying the complexity of the role of the principal can contribute to building aspiration for leadership (AITSL, 2015b). Developing this understanding of the role into a set of clear standards is generally agreed to be the foundations required for adequately preparing principals (Manna, 2015; The Wing Institute, 2018).

In Australia, the Australian Professional Standard for Principals also known as 'The Standard', has been in place since 2011. This public statement outlines what is expected of principals to know, understand and do to succeed in their schools (AITSL, 2015a). However, the standards go only so far towards principal preparation.

Currently, "preparation", or lack thereof and an inconsistency in a principals preparation is cited as one of the most significant factors impacting upon the attractiveness of the role of principal (Alhouti & Male, 2017; Davis, 2018; Gross, 2017; Hallinger & Bridges, 2017; Jiang, Sumintono, Perera, Harris, & Jones, 2018; Nasreen & Odhiambo, 2018; Orr et al., 2018). 'Preparation' refers to the period of time from a candidate's initial exploration of a principal position, to the point of commencing an appointment, and is arguably "… the most formative stage in a principal's leadership development and professional socialization" (Clarke & Wildy, 2013, p. 26).

The preparation programs that are built to meet the standards expected of the modern principal, need to be long term, consist of coaching and mentoring, engage aspirants in professional learning communities, include formal programs, consider innovative pedagogical and andragogical strategies and embed intercultural activities such as immersive experiences and literature analysis (Magee & Slater, 2013; Nelson & Slater, 2013).

This growing understanding of the demands of contemporary principalship has resulted in a global response to the need for greater principal preparation. Jiang and colleagues (2018), for example, have identified a significant increase in the number of principal training institutes in China between 2009 and 2017. Nasreen and Odhiambo (2018) also noted an increase in expectations for principals prior to commencement in Pakistan. This included further post-graduate qualifications, minimum teaching experience, formal written assessments and a two to three-month formal orientation. In Kuwait there has been an examination of existing preparation processes, with the development of recommendations for future principal preparation aligned with the literature regarding effective practices (Alhouti & Male, 2017). In the US, the Wallace Foundation and The Wing Institute are leading new agendas around principal preparation with the development of pipelines that heavily invest in work shadowing, internships and mentoring. There is also a myriad of professional licensure programs that are occurring globally to raise the standards of applicants.

This response is also reflected in Australia. For example, in Victoria the Bastow Institute is working closely with universities to implement preparation programs such as the Unlocking Potential Program and Victorian Aspiring Principal Assessment. Elsewhere in Australia, Education Queensland have responded with the implementation of the Take the Lead program in an attempt to address the shortfall and quality of applicants in remote and rural programs (Watterston, 2015). In addition, an innovative program of Future Leaders (Johnson & Flückiger, 2018) attempted to identify potential system leaders. The Queensland Education and Leadership Institute (QELi) have also continued to develop and refine their leadership pipeline programs and leadership frameworks. This is a significant step forward in Australia, with Wildy, Clarke, Styles, and Beycioglu (2010) reporting that there was no evidence of any State or Territory in Australia implementing or proposing principal preparation programs before 2010.

In spite of efforts to enhance the quality of principal preparation, the OECD's (2014) Teaching and Learning International Survey reported that strong leadership preparation continues to vary internationally. It found that more than 80% of principals report receiving adequate development in countries such as a Singapore, Japan and Korea, compared to only 32% in countries such as Croatia, Denmark and Poland (OECD, 2014). In Australia, while principals engage in formal teacher training prior to appointment to a school leadership position, only 40% engage in school administration or principal training programs (OECD, 2014). Watterston (2015) identifies that while there is a movement towards addressing principal preparation in Australia, there is a need for a more cohesive, systemic approach to school leadership development (Watterston, 2015).

In Queensland, principal preparation presents further contextual challenges due to the nature of Queensland schools. Over a quarter of all schools in Queensland are small schools with less than 100 students, and principals often commence their first leadership position in these schools (Clarke, Stevens, & Wildy, 2006; Lester, 2001). In addition, Queensland principals are significantly less experienced in school operations upon their first appointment, compared to their counterparts in other states and territories, and internationally (Clarke, 2002; Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Clarke et al., 2006; Lester, 2001; The Wing Institute, 2018). Magee and Slater (2013) contend that, without adequate preparation, principals are at risk of failure.

While this work around progressing to greater preparation is occurring, an interesting note is made by Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2010), that there is not necessarily a shortage of certified leaders in the US, but more so a shortage of well-qualified school leaders prepared to work in the schools of need. Therefore, preparation, while a major contributing factor to the growing disinterest in principalship, is only part of the response. There needs to be greater and earlier identification of aspirants (Watterston, 2015) for targeted school locations and environments. As Schiemann (2014) describes this as the attribute of "fit" for the school. Principals play an important part in this process (AITSL, 2020; Notman & Henry, 2011; Watterston, 2015), where there is a need for tighter tailoring of support and identification of potential aspirants to particular schools and nurturing of aspirants from wider pools than those presenting as the most natural pool (Cranston, 2007).

The significance of this research

While adequate preparation is part of solving the leadership crisis, how potential aspirants are identified is the first step. It is the identification and support of potential aspirants, or "talent" that this research project intends to explore, through the research question **the growing school leadership crisis in Queensland schools: Is talent management a Solution?**

What is understood of talent management is still in its infancy (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013) and in education, there are significant challenges to any talent management system (Asplund, 2019).

This study will build upon the existing literature around talent management to examine the challenges of adopting a talent management system in state schooling in Queensland. It will begin with a conceptual analysis of 'talent management' and how the concept has been applied in a range of business and industry contexts. This study will take into consideration the impacts of workplace culture, legislation, policy, practices, values and the role of participants and facilitators of talent

management. Based on the work of Asplund (2019), Myung, Loeb, and Horng (2011), Schiemann (2014), Turner (1960), and Vaiman and Collings (2013), talent management in this research project will be defined as a balanced approach to inclusive and targeted practices that are used to identify and develop potential leaders early in their career from within education.

In applying the concept of talent management to the education sector, the study will more specifically look at how existing principals can navigate the minefield of factors identified above, to address what would be required to effectively talent manage teachers from early in their career to build greater aspiration for the role of school principal. It will also examine how aspirants in Queensland can be trained to continue the regular flow of potential leaders (Earley & Jones, 2011). An early career teacher will be identified as a teacher within their first five years of teaching (McKenzie et al., 2014).

The significance of examining this work in the Queensland context, as already outlined, is due to additional challenges faced by the education system in Queensland. This includes factors such as the large number of small schools, distances that schools are located from metropolitan areas, and the lesser teaching experience of principals commencing their first appointment in comparison to other sectors in Australia. Further, in Queensland, workplace reforms and employee conditions are significantly influenced by trade unions such as the Queensland Teachers Union, with a membership of 47 000 (90% of all teachers and school leaders) and the Independent Education Union (Queensland Teacher's Union, 2020). Finally and most significantly, current strategies for employee development in state schooling in Queensland, are focused upon performance with an annual performance review and developing performance plan, rather than the identification of potential and talent (Department of Education, 2019). This current process is not valued by teachers and school leaders in Queensland, with only one in nine teachers, 26% of deputy principals and only 17% of principals surveyed in a 2018 workload survey believing that this process has any impact upon improving their work and only 25% of principals believed it improved staff performance (Rothman, Ingvarson, & Matthews, 2018).

It is intended that this research will lead to the development of a talent management strategy and a module of professional learning that will assist aspirant and existing principals to be able to define, identify, support and recommend talent in the Queensland context and to assist principals in continuing to build the pool of quality aspirants with the intended outcomes of contributing part of the solution to address the growing leadership crisis in Queensland schools.

A Conceptual Introduction to Talent Management

Talent management ranks in the top three priorities for CEOs worldwide (Frost, 2016). The process of talent management, generally consists of attracting and recruiting, identifying, supporting or developing, and retaining potential talent (Chabault, Hulin, & Soparnot, 2012; Frost, 2016; Schiemann, 2014). It should be a rigorous, cyclical, ongoing process, built on four key components: differentiation, assessment and ranking, performance management and transparency (Williamson, 2011). However, talent management approaches are varied across organisations and occupations (Thunnissen et al., 2013). While it is already acknowledged, that this research project will examine talent management from a balanced approach to identifying and developing potential leaders, the concept of talent management across the literature is diverse in its intent and definition (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Gonzalez-Cruz, 2013; Thunnissen, 2016; Vaiman & Collings, 2013). Talent management has traditionally been viewed as a managerialist driven, unitarist approach to the identification, recruitment and development of talent (Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen et al., 2013). This is changing with a move to a more pluralist view, where all stakeholders are involved in the development of talent (Collings, Scullion, & Vaiman, 2015; Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen et al., 2013).

The concept of inclusivity and exclusivity within talent management systems, can be identified early in research into upward mobility, or promotion in the elite upper realms of society and the identification of talent. Turner (1960), identified that there are two approaches to upward mobility in his exploration of moving into elite status in the schooling system. **Sponsored Mobility** is deemed as the controlled, early selection and induction of recruits, whereas **Contest Mobility** is an open contest for elite status and every effort is maintained to keep candidates in the race until the end. Unlike sponsored mobility, the onus for achievement is placed upon the individual.

When these principles are applied to talent management, contest mobility is where processes for development and opportunities for leadership are open and the opportunity for upward mobility or promotion is driven by the individual, how hard the individual works and the education the individual obtains (Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999). Whereas sponsored mobility is where individuals are targeted, or tapped for leadership development and opportunities by existing leaders. Wayne et al. (1999) discuss the sponsored mobility approach to talent management as important, as it is inefficient and may not be possible for leaders to invest in all subordinates, and it leads to greater career success through the measures of salary progression, promotability and employee satisfaction.

Within literature around talent management in education, it is informal sponsored mobility or tapping, that is most referred to when discussing talent management (Myung et al., 2011). It is also identified as the classical approach to talent management (Asplund, 2019). The process of sponsored mobility can have a significant impact upon teacher interest in pursuing leadership. Myung et al. (2011), identified that teachers who have been engaged in tapping, are five times more likely to continue to pursue school leadership positions. While this may be the case, talent management and talent identification in the education sector is in its infancy in comparison to other major industries (Asplund, 2019).

While the concept of talent management is varied in its definition and approach, a large cause for this diversity can be attributed to a lack of clarity of the underpinning construct of talent (Chabault et al., 2012; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). In their examination of the literature Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013) identified that talent can greatly vary in definition from a focus on mastery of skills, consideration of an individual personal attributes through to description of an entire employee population. They summarised talent definition into two approaches, talent as characteristics of people (Object Approach) and talent as people (Subject Approach) see Fig.1.
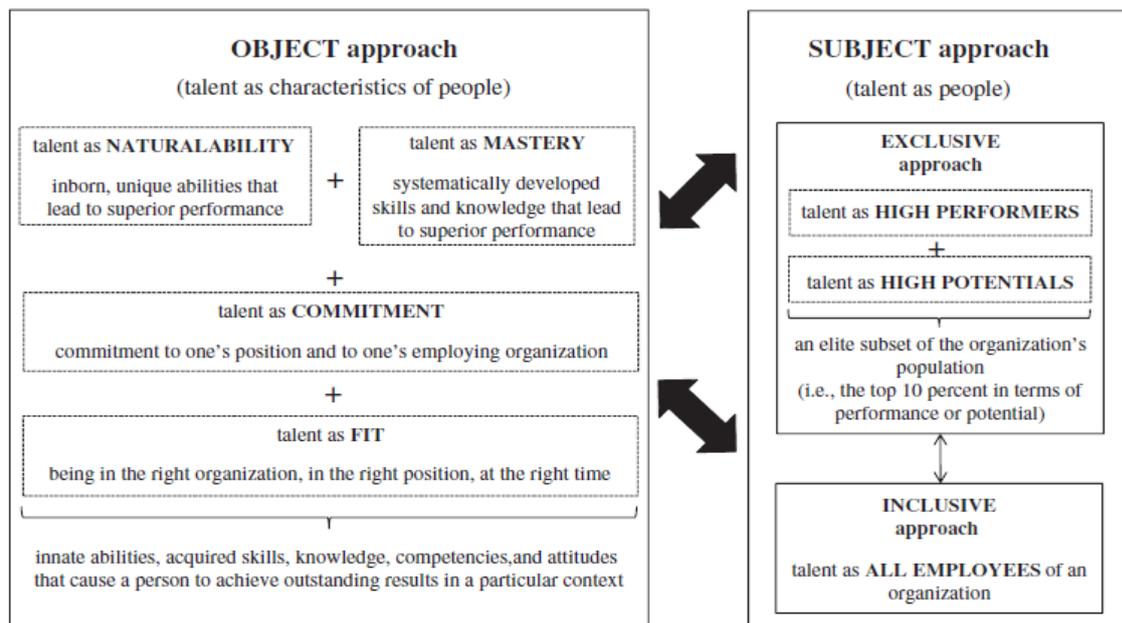

Fig. 1. Framework for the conceptualisation of talent within the world of work (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013)

More recently, Frost (2016, p. 26) defines talent as "people with ambition and potential…it refers to aptitudes of different people matched to the needs of an organisation". The concept of potential continues to be raised across the literature (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013) and it is 'high-potential' that needs to be considered, where, "high-potential employees are the ones who have the ability, aspiration, and engagement aspects" (Sweis, Al Sharef, Jandali, Obeidat, & Andrawes, 2018, p. 143)

to provide organisational competitive advantage and positive influence on performance. However, the understanding of what is high potential is still unclear with definitions varying over the last four decades from someone singled out and considered as a possible future leader (Brooklyn Derr, 1987), through to individuals with motivation, capacity and learning agility necessary to advance multiple leadership levels at a rapid rate (Morris & Rogers, 2013).   Further challenging the concept of high potential is that managers often mistake performance for potential and will judge possible talent on past performance rather than future potential (Rebeťák & Farkašová, 2015). This challenge is just as evident in education as it is in business. Myung et al. (2011), identify that a major influence in identification for potential leadership is the active participation of teachers in school-level leadership. They identify that principals are more likely to "tap" teachers for principalship or encourage interest in leadership in those who are active participants in their schools.

The Practice of Talent Management in Education

The Turnover and Retention Research Report from the Australian HR Institute (Begley & Dunne, 2018), identified that one of the greatest retention factors for employees is career progression opportunities, with 63.2% of employee departures contributed to the lack of opportunities. While this report does not identify particular sectors, education was one of the largest respondents, contributing to 12.05% of responses and findings. This is reinforced by the findings of Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (2015), where it is identified that an important challenge to the design of effective principal preparation in Australia is the lack of clear career pathways and the inconsistent leadership expectations at different career levels. Hence, there is a need to not only capture the small number of aspirants, but also build the number of educators aspiring to leadership. In a broad sense, this is a critical component of talent management.

In the 1960's the theory of social exchange was presented with the publication of Power and Exchange in Social Life by Peter Blau. In short, this theory proposed that the more that systems and employers invest in their people, the more loyal they become and willing they will be to work beyond their current position and role. Two things may occur from this type of workforce relationship. From a leader's perspective, the investment into the social exchange with an employee or subordinate, has the intended reward of the employee possibly taking on more responsibility as a 'favour' for the leader or may even result in the employee becoming more aligned and supportive of the workplace culture and agenda. From the employee's perspective, the investment into the social exchange with a leader by taking on responsibility, or supporting direction of the leader, will result in greater investment and reward for the employee in the way of preferable treatment, promotional

opportunity or investment in personal development (Blau, 1964). Investing in and developing talent, is a key component of a talent management system. Through a commitment to professional learning and preparation of aspirants, there should be greater interest and willingness from teachers to step into school leadership. However, at present, this is not occurring, with an increasing number of middle leaders not seeking principalship (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Fink & Brayman, 2004; McKenzie et al., 2014). This could suggest that there is an issue in the way that talent is being managed in education.

With increasing unionised movements concerning workload (Queensland Teacher's Union, 2019), growing value of work-life balance (Goyal, Jain, & Jain, 2013; Nilsson, Blomqvist, & Andersson, 2017) and an awareness of the pressures of the role of the principal, the potential of social exchange theory as a foundation of talent management system in education to build a pool of leaders is further challenged.

In many countries, aspirants are identified by a reliance on self-selection to fill enrolments in training and development programs. While this approach rewards initiative, it can be inefficient and self-selected candidates may or may not be the best qualified (Schleicher, 2012). It also does not address a school's or jurisdictions specific needs for succession planning. However, if we strategically and systematically identify, support and recommend potential leaders and aspirants there is an opportunity to address this growing leadership crisis (Rhodes, Brundrett, & Nevill, 2008).

There are also some significant risks associated with a talent management system that only consider a sponsored mobility approach. Asplund (2019), discusses the mediating effects of professionalism upon a talent management system. Asplund (2019) particular identifies the professional values of egalitarianism, autonomy and expertise as elements that must be considered in a talent management system within education. These values operate in contrast to and provide a challenge to the need to accelerate potential school leaders (Earley & Jones, 2011) and the principles of sponsored mobility.

There is a further risk in talent management that relies solely on sponsored mobility and that is homophily. Myung et al. (2011), identify that where tapping occurs in a school environment, that there is a risk of unintended bias and preferable treatment for those who are more aligned with the leader's beliefs, are like minded individuals or come from similar cultural or geographical heritage. In addition to existing principals tapping teachers based on elements of homophily, Myung et al. (2011) found that principals had a tendency to support aspirants who self-identify as better equipped to take on the role or are actively engaged in additional responsibilities and leadership opportunities across the school. This leads to identification of candidates based on performance,

where the more leadership type tasks you complete the more likely you are to be noticed and recommended. It also reduces the likelihood of principals identifying potential leadership of teachers. Myung et al. (2011) question whether there are other ways that systems can identify potential leaders, rather than through the completion of tasks within the school.

Finally a challenge around any talent management system is that of consistency and identification of talent (Vaiman & Collings, 2013), particularly if sponsored mobility is to be employed. In systems as large as education where there are multiple tiers of organisational structure, such as central, region, district and school level, how does a talent management system remain consistent and transparent? While the use of standards is one way of supporting this consistency, (Waidelich, 2012), questions whether principals actually refer to this when recommending aspirants for leadership opportunities or whether it is more intuition from the principal.

Summary and Conclusions

It is clear, that if we are to address the growing leadership crisis in schools, that preparation is a necessary response. However, systems must also look at how and when leaders are identified. There is a need for earlier identification of leaders, and targeted investment to sustain the willingness to aspire for principalship. A formal talent management system is a proposed response. The concept of talent management will be built upon the principles of social exchange theory, which implies that with targeted investment, acknowledgement and commitment to an individual, the individual will reciprocate this investment and will show greater loyalty, commitment and motivation back to the employer or system.

However, unlike practices around informal tapping and sponsored mobility as the sole process, while it can build motivation for aspiration, it may have many risks associated that operate in contradiction to the professional values of education. There needs to be exploration of how a balanced approach to talent management can be implemented in education, that considers both contest mobility and sponsored mobility, while addressing the current challenges within human resource management of teachers in the education workforce.

To do so, this research project will use a pragmatic research methodology using a Sequential Explanatory Design incorporating narrative inquiry from existing and aspirant principals and other stakeholders to examine whether there is a need for, what elements would exist in an effective talent management system and how to overcome the challenges of implementing a talent management system in the journey towards principalship in Queensland.

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