The late-career and transition to retirement phases for school leaders in the 21st Century: the aspirations, expectations, experiences and reflections of late-career and recently-retired principals in New South Wales (2008-2012).

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MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

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Statement of Candidate

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled **"The late-career and the transition to retirement phases for school leaders in the 21st Century: the aspirations, expectations, experiences and reflections of   late-career and recently-retired principals in New South Wales (2008-2012)",** has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

The research presented in this thesis was approved by Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee, reference number: **Ethics approval number** HE26SEP2008-D06091; **Ethics date of approval** September 26, 2008.

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CONTENTS   **Page**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationships between late career, ageing and work for school principals in the 21st century; and the implications of those relationships for educational jurisdictions, professional associations and individual principals.

Organizational psychologists Beehr and Bennett (2007) believe that "as the baby-boomer population ages, the number of retirees and the proportion of the society they represent will almost certainly increase to levels never before seen. Thus it is now more important than ever to understand retirement" (p.277). In Australia the record retirement level is creating a drain on experience in the workforce whilst simultaneously resulting in a shrinking working-sector supporting an increasing retired-sector. These trends are acknowledged as political, economic and social issues of national significance.

The education community is not exempt. This is especially so in the area of educational leadership. Internationally, educational jurisdictions are dealing with potential principal shortages as an unprecedented number of principals approach retirement age. The situation is exacerbated in some cases by a low number of aspirants. At a time of increasing public awareness and high-level political sensitivity about school systems, the capacity of educational jurisdictions to have effective leadership succession strategies is extremely important. The relationship between the principal retirement bulge and effective school leadership beckons closer investigation.

To investigate what the phenomenon of retirement actually means for "baby boomer" principals, this study draws on the experiences, feelings and beliefs of school principals in New South Wales (Australia). The phenomenon of retirement is explored as a continuum rather than an event, with the parameters stretching from principals' late-career to their recently-retired phase. The journey (or transition) along that pathway provides the background context for the study. The perceptual meaning and nature of retirement are explored through an investigation of the aspirations, expectations, reflections and experiences of late-career and recently-retired principals. The study adopts a grounded theory approach (with the data gathered driving the research) and uses quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Research in this area is relatively recent and scarce, particularly in the educational leadership domain. With the inter-face between rapidly ageing societies and work the 21st century not yet clear, the findings provide valuable information for educational leadership theory, for educational policy makers, for principal professional associations, and for individual principals.

CHAPTER TITLES

Chapter 1: The impact of change on 21st century retirement: demographic, economic, workforce and generational change

Chapter 2: Retirement and the principalship: the current educational context

Chapter 3: Research design and methodology

Chapter 4: Questionnaire: late-career and recently-retired principals

Chapter 5: Interviews: late-career principals

Chapter 6: Interviews: recently-retired principals

Chapter 7: Triangulation of findings and themes

Chapter 8: Key findings and recommendations

Chapter 9: Summative discussion and concluding remarks

CHAPTER CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 8

LIST OF APPENDICES

PREFACE

The genesis of this study was grounded in personal experience. In 2004 I was approaching retirement with some trepidation after 40 years with the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSWDET); the last fifteen years as a school principal. It became increasingly evident through sharing my experience with my peers that many principals felt unsettled transitioning through their late-career phase. These feelings (predominantly a mixture of anticipation and anxiety) were quite disorientating. We felt confronted by the fast approaching reality that we would no longer be the local school principal; we would no longer be someone of importance in the eyes of others; and we would no longer be part of professional collegial networks.

These feelings related to our personal and professional *readiness* to retire and to withdraw from the workforce. Anecdotally there were stories about principals who had opted to stay-on instead of retire; and stories about others who had retired but had re-engaged in paid work which drew on their professional skills, experience and expertise. This information was suggesting that such work was providing a sense of purpose and a re-assuring sense of self-worth for these late-career principals as they transitioned into retirement.

At the point of retirement my employer (NSWDET) offered me a part-time project manager role in a leadership development program. This experience led to further offers of part-time employment. These roles proved to be professionally stimulating, personally satisfying and contributed to a feeling of being valued as someone who was still able to make a meaningful contribution to the educational community in particular; and to the society in general. This *refocusing* into part-time paid work proved to be an energizing experience at the time when conventional wisdom suggested that golf, lunches, travel, leisure and cooking courses would be the dominant aspects of my retired life-style. A similar pattern was emerging amongst my professional peers. When together socially or professionally those of us who had opted to return to the workforce expressed delight in finding that we felt valued; intellectually challenged; socially engaged; personally satisfied; financially enhanced and professionally energized.

BABY BOOMER PARADIGM

These experiences, peer group discussions and personal observations led to an interest in reading into the commentaries of Australian social researchers (Salt, 2006; MacKay, 2007; McCrindle, 2009). References were made in these readings and the public media to government reports (the Intergenerational Reports 2002, 2007 and 2010) which indicated that demographic and economic change was sweeping across the nation as the largest generational group , the so-called "baby

boomers" (i.e. generally considered to be those born between 1946 and 1964) were reaching retirement age. This phenomenon was predicted to present major structural challenges for the government in particular; and for the society in general. The potential latent implications of this event were now being seen by governments as impacting dramatically on the nation's economic and social health (Costello, 2002 and 2007; Swan, 2010). Projections of unprecedented population growth combined with a dramatic ageing of the population were starting to be mentioned in terms of a looming economic and social crisis with a large and increasing number of retirees requiring government-funded support from a smaller and shrinking base of tax-paying workers. The core of the problem was how might the nation meet the financial expectations (e.g. specifically aged pensions and health care costs) for a significantly expanding number of retirees?

ECONOMIC PARADIGM

The consequential economic projection is for a shrinking workforce and a skills shortage as the accumulated experience and expertise of the baby boomer generation leaves the workforce. This will have a negative effect on national productivity at the very time that the nation needs increased productivity and higher workforce participation rates to fund the financial, health and welfare needs of the largest percentage of retirees the nation has ever experienced (Swan, 2010). With improvements in medical science the situation is further exacerbated as this new-found longevity will see baby boomers expecting to live till around 90 years of age (Cooper, 2007). Government is warning that the strong economic growth of the final two decades of the 20th century, which resulted in a relatively comfortable life-style for many Australians, is now being threatened by the imminent retirement of the very same generation which has built that prosperity (Swan, 2010). This situation could well lead to a stalling of (if not a falling in) the standard of living which Australians have come to enjoy and expect (Swan, 2010). One major government initiative to avoid this outcome has been for older workers to be encouraged to stay connected to the workforce for longer. This could be achieved by either *staying-on* (in their current role) or by refocusing back into the workforce (following retirement). The economic advantages of older workers not fully retiring till later are seen to be: (1) an increase in the workforce participation rates; (2) an increase in the national productivity; (3) a strengthening of the taxation base; and (4) a delaying of the quantum of eligible retirees accessing government funded pension and health care support (Swan, 2010).

EDUCATION PARADIGM

The initial intent of this research was to explore to what extent (if at all), the educational leadership community in New South Wales (as a microcosm of the wider community) was likely to experience these same societal challenges in relation to baby boomer retirements; and if so, how might the education community best accommodate and cope with the demands of those challenges. It

seemed particularly interesting to investigate what might be the impact of the retirement of large numbers of school principals on (1) the leadership succession in schools; and (2) on the retention/transfer of accumulated wisdom and knowledge. To more closely examine the phenomena of the late-career and the transition to retirement phases for principals, it seemed important to interrogate the current educational leadership literature in relation to: late-career principalship; principal retirements; principal shortages; succession planning; knowledge transfer; innovative leadership models; flexible part-time/job-share work models; transition to retirement patterns; and preferred retirement life-style patterns. As I was to subsequently discover, what was found to be missing from the current literature was direct research with school principals about what late-career, transition to retirement and retirement actually meant for them. It seemed logical to address this aspect of educational leadership in the research by exploring *the expectations and aspirations of late-career principals; and the experiences and reflections of recently-retired principals in New South Wales' schools,* using a research framework appropriate to doctoral study by thesis.

LATE-CAREER PARADIGM

Initial explorations of the available literature suggested that the questions worthy of further exploration in relation to late-career principals seemed to be: How effective do late-career principals feel in their roles as educational leaders? Is late-career a satisfying career phase? Are late-career principals interested in staying-on past their retirement date? What are the personal and professional issues facing late-career principals transitioning to retirement? Are late-career principals interested in refocusing following retirement? What are late-career principals' expectations and anticipations about the next phase of their life and career? Do employing authorities actively encourage late-career principals to stay-on and/or refocus? Are there flexible and alternative job-sharing/part-time work patterns for late-career principals who wish to "ramp-off"? Is there a process for employing authorities to capture and transfer the accumulated knowledge, wisdom and experience of late-career principals?

RECENTLY-RETIRED PARADIGM

The questions worthy of further exploration in relation to recently-retired principals seemed to be: How effective do recently-retired principals feel as educational leaders in their late-career? What motivates recently-retired principals to retire when they do? What are the personal and professional issues in the transition to retirement process? To what extent are recently-retired principals staying-on/refocusing in retirement? In what sectors do retired principals find refocused work? What have been the experiences of principals who opted to stay-on/refocus past their retirement date? Are there part-time and/or job-sharing flexible work patterns which enabled

interested principals to ramp off? Do employing authorities encourage principals to stay-on or refocus? How do recently-retired principals describe their retired life-style? How do recently-retired principals assess their satisfaction levels in retirement?

IN SUMMARY

Drawing these themes together initially led this study to explore the relationships between the demographic, economic, workforce, retirement and generational changes in modern Australian society as they relate to the baby boomer retirement issue; and the rise of a "new retirement" model (Johnson, 2001; Salt, 2006; MacKay, 2007; McCrindle, 2009). The focus then narrowed to an examination of the current (and projected) educational context in relation to extent which (if at all) those changes were impacting on school leadership. What followed was direct research with NSW "baby boomer" school principals in relation to their aspirations, expectations, experiences and reflections about the phenomena of late-career and transition to retirement. The findings and recommendations based upon the responses complete this study.

As the study emerged, the degree of interest nationally and internationally, was both surprising and encouraging. This led to invitations to present papers at state, national and international conferences, several of which resulted in journal articles. These opportunities enabled expert and peer comment on the emerging findings and proved to be valuable tools for further reflective analysis. Other unanticipated outcomes were invitations from employing authorities and private firms to present professional development programs to late-career leaders on preparation for, and transition to retirement. Even more recently state superannuation funds have shown an interest in utilizing the findings to produce new products to support the planning and transition to retirement for their members.

EXPLANATION

When this research was commenced in 2008 the New South Wales public education system was termed NSWDET (New South Wales Department of Education and Training). In 2011 the name was changed to NSWDEC (New South Wales Department of Education and Community). For the purposes of this research the public education system in NSW will be referred to as NSWDET.