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Abstract

Whilst extensive research has been undertaken concerning educational leadership and management, there is a paucity of scholarship regarding the merit-selection of school leaders other than principals. This is especially true of principal-led merit selection panels convened to recruit middle-level school leaders, namely deputy principals, assistant principals and head teachers. Meritocratic discourse holds that merit-based selection should, ostensibly be an objective, fair and equitable process enabling applicants to compete on a level playing field via a comparative assessment of their capabilities, talents and attitudes. This paper explores the extent to which government school principals in the state of New South Wales Australia, consider the school-based merit selection process they lead is objective and bias-free. Hence, the findings reported here reveal that despite the New South Wales Department of Education (NSWDE) promulgating the primacy of merit in its school-based selection paradigm, non-merit variables (factors having little to do with merit) exert considerable influence over the appointment decisions made by NSWDE principals when assembling their respective school leadership teams.

Keywords: *Leadership; change; education; design thinking; systems thinking*

Introduction

Merit selection is a fair, objective and equitable measure of an individual's capabilities, and talents (Jackson, 2007; McNamee & Miller, 2004) in comparison to another's. Consequently, it is commonly perceived to be an essential tenet of neoliberal democratic society (Littler, 2018; Thornton, 2013) given its frequent use in workplace recruitment (McNamee & Miller, 2004; Scully, 2000; Son Hing et al., 2011).

A meritocracy by contrast, is perceived as a society based upon the ideal of merit whereby success, measured by social mobility, is driven by an individual's inherent talents and work ethic (Bellows, 2009; Castilla & Benard, 2010; Kim & Choi, 2017; Littler, 2018; Poocharoen & Brillantes, 2013). Interestingly, when first coined by Fox (1956) and then employed by Young (1958) in his dystopian novel *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, it was used pejoratively as a portent of the problems a futuristic society would encounter should it be exclusively merit-based. Despite this, its meaning transformed in the latter part of the twentieth century to become both a widely

accepted workplace-justice ideal (Son Hing et al., 2011), and one of the most enduring sociocultural tropes of our time (Littler, 2018; Thornton, 2013).

The precepts of meritocratic discourse are now used to justify the allocation of employment resources in society. Indeed, it is a commonly held belief in neoliberal meritocracies that job applicants compete for positions on level playing fields with recruitment outcomes determined entirely on merit (Littler, 2018). In theory, non-meritocratic variables such as social status, race, ethnicity, patronage, seniority, religion and gender are excluded from merit-based recruitment decisions (Littler, 2018; McNamee & Miller, 2004; Thornton, 2013).

The following government school study, conducted in the state of New South Wales (NSW) Australia, was specifically designed to investigate the objectivity of New South Wales Department of Education (NSWDE) principals when merit-selecting deputy principals, assistant principals (primary) and head teachers (secondary) as members of their school leadership cadres. Henceforth, they will be referred to as middle-level school leaders.

As a statutory authority, the NSWDE has administered government school education in NSW since 1848. Currently, it is responsible for the provision of state funded education to approximately 791,763 students (NSWDE, 2017) in 2,240 primary and secondary schools (NSWDE, 2015a) across an expanse of 800,642 square kilometres (Geoscience Australia, 2018).

Teachers are appointed to leadership positions in NSW government schools following the requisite screening and consent of the NSWDE. This centralized entity provides final approval for all statewide in-school leadership recruitment decisions and delegates to principals the responsibility of convening merit selection panels for the recruitment of middle-level school leaders. Accordingly, NSWDE principals are the on-site senior educational and administrative school leaders, assisted by deputy principals who, when required, can discharge a principal's leadership responsibilities at short notice. Further, middle-level leadership is also evident in government schools at both assistant principal (primary school) and head teacher (secondary school) levels (De Nobile, 2018 ; Dinham, 2016).

NSWDE schools are therefore multi-level leadership bodies that have the potential to enrich their learning communities. Indeed, numerous studies have demonstrated conclusive links between "expert" educational leadership (Robinson, 2010; Goldring et al., 2009), school improvement (Huber et al., 2010; Smith & Piele, 2006) and enhanced student achievement (Coelli & Green, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004). Further, given that contemporary principals have become increasingly more accountable to both the public and government (Gronn & Lacey, 2006; MacBeath et al., 2006; Marks & McCulla, 2016), it is hardly surprising that principals are keen to incorporate high-calibre instructional leaders (leaders who improve the quality of teaching and learning) in their teams.

The impact of external accountability on the selection of school leaders is reflected in research reporting a tendency for school leadership positions, notably at the principal level, to be

filled by “safe” applicants who “best fit” the school (Palmer et al., 2016). Studies (Holgersson, 2013; Grummell et al., 2009; White, 2018) have also noted that this selection strategy is influenced by what Blackmore et al. (2006) have described as a “form of homosociability” whereby the values, philosophies and attitudes of successful leadership applicants often mirror those of their selectors. Indeed, the closer the alignment the greater the likelihood of recruitment (Blackmore et al., 2006; Walker & Kwan, 2012).

Most studies regarding school leadership recruitment have focused specifically on the merit-selection of school principals. The research reported here is unique in that it examines the perceptions of principals regarding their own merit selection practices. Thus, this paper explores two related research questions (RQs) namely, RQ1: *To what extent do principals regard their merit selection of school leaders to be an objective process?* And secondly, RQ2: *According to school principals, what role do non-merit variables play in their recruitment of school leaders?*

The importance of these RQs is underscored by their ability to facilitate an investigation into a previously uncharted area of principal-led merit selection procedures. Further, they provide an opportunity to determine the extent to which principals believe they adhere to the presumed values of meritocratic selection namely: fairness, objectivity and equity, whilst recruiting their leadership cadres (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Foley & Williamson, 2019; McNamee & Miller, 2004; Scully, 1997, 2000).

Methodology

This study utilized semi-structured interviews and cross-sectional online survey methodology (Gay et al., 2014) to explore the selection practices of NSWDE principals and the degree to which they were influenced by subjectivity, local logics (Grummell et al., 2009), homosociability (Blackmore et al., 2006) and internoselection (internal recruitment) when appointing middle-level school leaders. Accordingly, the empirical data presented here was drawn from 12 principal interviews and an online survey completed by 191 principals.

The face-to-face principal interviews were recorded and transcribed to elicit in-depth qualitative information regarding their most common attitudes to merit selection practice. These informed the design and structure of an online survey that was subsequently completed by a diverse range of principals throughout NSW.

Principal interviewees were selected in the full knowledge that given the time-consuming nature of their work (Darmody & Smyth, 2016), they would be reluctant to make time to be interviewed by an unknown researcher. In order to address that concern, snowballing or chain referral methodology (Gay et al., 2014; Layder, 2005) was utilized to achieve the requisite number of interviews. Each successive principal-interviewee was asked to provide a colleague-referral for subsequent interview thereby providing a highly effective and time efficient way of contacting previously unknown interview subjects. The initial principal however was randomly selected “out

of a hat” and drawn from schools adjacent to the university campus with the NSWDE’s Home Page: *Finding a Public School* (NSWDE, 2018) providing the necessary school contact details. Once successful communication was made with a willing principal, the aims of the study were outlined and written approval to participate was sought - a process followed for every interview.

As previously mentioned, the snowballing or referral technique was repeated in all subsequent interviews, the data from which, ultimately informed the development of an online survey. The ensuing survey design was greatly assisted by the demographic diversity that emerged with interviewees self-identifying as being either a male (n=6) or a female (n=6) working in both urban (n=7) and rural (n=5) schools.

The online survey explored the individual perceptions of NSWDE principals pertaining to the merit-selection process they administered to assemble their respective school leadership cadres. It prudently incorporated a balance between both question style and format to ensure clear and explicit phrasing. Further, it was also reviewed by two academics with research-based doctoral degrees and an operational knowledge of the NSWDE merit selection process. Three practicing principals, each with a minimum of 15 years merit-selection experience, were also asked to assess a hard copy of the survey with regard to its clarity, validity and relevance. Subsequently, a further three principal-volunteers completed the digital version to identifying any on-screen glitches. The online Qualtrics survey was then launched, with a programmed cutoff date, providing principal-volunteers with a three-week window for its completion.

Emails were also distributed to principals simultaneously to the launch inviting voluntary participation in the study. Those who wished to take part were instructed to use the hyperlink embedded in their email invitation for transfer to a Qualtrics platform hosting the survey, provide their digital permission to participate, and then complete the survey. The survey comprised *option-button entry* and *extended response* questions specifically designed to harvest both quantitative and qualitative data for analysis by both SPSS and NVivo software. Of the 2000 email invitations distributed to schools throughout NSW, 191 principals completed the anonymous online survey. Despite an inconsistent survey response rate (incomplete survey data was not discarded), it provided a unique insight into the operation and efficacy of the merit selection practices of NSWDE principals.

Results

Profile of interview participants

The interviews in this study provided a balance of both female and male perspectives with the majority (n=8) being experienced practitioners in that they had led schools for seven to fifteen years (see Table 1). The views of comparatively inexperienced principals (n=4) were also evident having served as principals for periods ranging from one to four years. Further, the respondents

were drawn from both secondary (n=6) and primary school (n=6) settings. The qualitative data gleaned from the interviews provided details of current merit selection practices from a small, but demographically diverse range of NSWDE principals. Consequently, their personal reflections and insights into not only their own, but also their colleagues' merit selection practices, greatly assisted the design of the statewide online survey discussed in this paper.

Table 1. Interview profile of principals

Interview Number	School Type	Gender	Age Band (Years)	Principal Experience (Years)	School Location
1	Primary School	Male	60+	15	Urban
2	High School	Male	60+	8	Rural
3	Primary School	Female	56-60	13	Urban
4	Primary School	Female	46-55	10	Rural
5	High School	Male	46-55	10	Urban
6	High School	Male	46-55	7	Rural
7	High School	Female	46-55	1	Urban
8	High School	Male	46-55	10	Rural
9	High School	Female	46-55	4	Urban
10	Primary School	Female	36-45	2	Rural
11	High School	Female	46-55	12	Urban
12	Primary School	Male	36-45	4	Urban

(n=12)

Profile of online survey participants

Table 2 presents the respondent profile of the principals who completed the online survey (n=191) and is remarkable in that it is similar to both the age-band and geographical location data of principals published in NSW state government demographic statistics (NSWDE, 2015b; NSWDE, 2017). Further, the weighting of female and male principal voices provided a relatively balanced perspective regarding the in-school merit selection practices utilised by those principals at the time of this study.

Table 2. Principal survey profile

Gender	Female	Male			
Sample	54.74%	45.26%			
NSW¹	74%	45.26%			
School Location	Urban	Rural			
Sample	65.59%	34.41%			
NSW¹	72%	28%			
Years as a Principal	0–5	6–10	11–20	20+	
Sample	23.81%	32.80%	31.22%	12.17%	
Principal Age Band (Years)	25–35	36–45	46–55	56–60	60+
Sample	1.05%	15.26%	26.84%	34.21%	22.63%
NSW²	1.9%	17.7%	37%	28.3%	15%
Years in Teaching Service	0–10	11–20	21–30	31+	
Sample	1.58%	16.84%	30.53%	51.06%	
Selection Panels Convened	None	1–5	6–10	11–15	16+
Sample	4.21%	26.32%	30.53%	18.95%	20%

¹Source: NSW Department of Education: The Teaching Workforce in NSW Public Schools 2015, pp.7–8.

²Source: NSW Department of Education: Permanent School Teacher Profiles September 2017, p.2

The rich data generated from both the interviews and surveys were subjected to a systematic coding process characterised by the identification, categorisation and detailed analysis of overarching textual themes (Bazeley, 2013) by both SPSS and NVivo software in order to address the two RQs shaping this study. Consequently, the raison d'être of the report that follows is twofold, namely to discuss the extent to which NSWDE principals regarded their stewardship of the merit selection paradigm to be objective, and secondly, whether the interplay of non-merit variables influenced their selection practices when recruiting middle-level school leaders. The following section therefore reports the findings applicable to each of the two previously mentioned RQs.

RQ1: Do principals regard the merit selection of school leaders to be an objective process?

The principals who completed the online survey were asked to indicate via option-button entry, whether they believed merit could be measured objectively when recruiting school

Table 3. Can merit be “measured” objectively?

Response	Frequency	%
Yes	26	14.7
Maybe	54	30.5
Unsure	22	12.4
No	75	42.4

n = 177 (14 non-attempts)

leaders (see Table 3). The majority (54.8%) indicated that either it wasn’t possible to do so, or were unsure if merit-based selection could be executed objectively. These findings accord with research reporting that implicit bias, often created by unconscious attitudes and stereotypes, was highly prevalent in merit selection decisions (Beattie & Johnson, 2012; Foley & Williamson, 2019).

Principals were also asked to elaborate using their own words, on why they had selected the survey response option in Table 3. Many indicated that the merit selection of school leaders was both a variable and subjective process:

The whole notion of merit selection is to look at the candidates and make a judgment, and judgments are rarely about being objective.

Basically, my idea of “merit” is different to another’s idea—even with the same selection criteria.

We have a preconceived notion of what a good teacher or a good leader is—and that preconceived notion is most likely to unintentionally be middle class, white, and probably male.

Also, when asked during interview whether they thought merit could be measured objectively, one principal stated:

I would say no it can’t be represented in an objective way... you’ve got to be working towards that aspiration... but you never entirely get there... merit can never be understood objectively. (Male principal with 10 years’ experience: urban location)

As well, survey respondents indicated a tendency for the selection of “known” and “trusted” internal candidates – especially those who had relieved in leadership positions over time:

Some panels make decisions on subjective grounds e.g., we like the person who has been relieving.

I am sometimes concerned about the percentage of promotions that go in-house to the local hero.

There will always be some subjectivity to the process and in rural and remote areas the chances are the positions will be filled in-house. Therefore the candidates will be known to the panel.

A principal interviewee also suggested that:

If you've got people in your school going for the position, anyone who's been relieving in the position or is at the school has an advantage. They're always going to have an advantage because they know how the school runs, they understand the leadership team, they understand what's required of them. So they're always going to have an advantage over someone coming in cold.

(Female principal with 10 years' experience: rural location)

A common view also expressed by principals in this study was a desire to select candidates who were the "best fit" for their school. This opinion features widely in scholarly literature with varying definitions (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Baron, 1990; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Walker & Kwan, 2012). However, despite the inherent difficulty in objectively measuring it, the closest thing to a unified definition of best fit has been proffered by Palmer et al. (2016) who consider it a "real" or "perceived" congruence between a candidate's attributes and aspects of the organization (school culture). This notion was similarly reflected in survey responses:

Each school has a unique culture and selecting a suitable candidate involves subjective assessment. I was told that: "you need to fit the position and the school"—a very subjective assessment!

It all comes down to the human side however, of how will the applicant best fit our school context and personalities

The panel is looking for a particular type of leader for a specific role and as soon as you meet the shortlisted candidates you often get a gut feeling for who will be the best fit.

Further to the idea of best fit, survey respondents completed an open question to explain if and why they considered the merit selection process to be a reliable recruitment tool. Their responses were subsequently coded according to reoccurring or essence-capturing patterns (Bazeley, 2013). As a result, four main themes emerged (see Table 4) with each being assigned a numerical value ranging from one (1) to four (4). The conversion of qualitative data to numerical format enabled SPSS software to generate the resultant frequency profiles. Interestingly, the two most prominent themes to emerge related to the subjective assessment of *best fit*, and *concerns about the integrity of the selection process* – especially with regard to the influence of subjectivity and favouritism.

Table 4. Principal perspectives on the reliability of the current merit selection process

Response	Frequency	%
It facilitates best fit	80	47.2
It raises integrity concerns	79	46.8
Problematic software/time consuming	5	3
Selection requires a practical component	5	3

n = 169 (22 non-attempts)

Another area where the objectivity of the merit selection process was called into question was the interview. Principals were asked to complete an open-ended survey question to indicate if and why they considered the recruitment interview paradigm to be an effective way to assess merit. Their responses were coded and analysed by SPSS software generating the frequency data in Table 5 below.

Table 5. How effective is the current interview process in the assessment of merit?

Response	Frequency	%
The interview process is ineffective	73	54.9
The interview process is effective	46	34.6
Interview is just one part of the process	8	6
There is no alternative to interview	4	3
Unsure	2	1.5

n = 133 (58 non-attempts)

Just over half the survey participants (n=73, 55%) regarded the interview process to be an ineffective way to assess merit. Typical survey commentary regarding principals' concerns about the integrity of the merit selection process are illustrated below:

Unfortunately there are principals who play favourites and only employ staff they already know.

I think despite the assurances about fairness and equity there are times when jobs have been awarded on the basis of not what you know but who you know.

Too often there is a “going with how I feel” rather than going with evidence of best suited. Friendship deals seem to rule and principals manipulate so a predetermined person gets the job.

Similar concerns were raised during face-to-face interviews with principals:

The process is very much based on panel members’ subjective opinions and a personal feel about the suitability of the candidate. Referees will have subjective opinions and bias towards the candidate in most cases. It is impossible to keep emotion and personal feelings and impressions out of the process.

(Male principal with 7 years’ experience: rural location)

I think we all make value judgements all the time. Like I said, walking down the street, you see someone for two seconds and construct their whole life for them. You’re probably reasonably close... the whole process is subjective.

(Female principal with 4 years’ experience: urban location)

Survey respondents were also apprehensive about their ability to objectively assess and compare leadership applicants in high stakes selection contexts often characterised by “impression management” (Law et al., 2016) or, to put it more simply, interviewee deception:

Applicants knowingly make claims that are untrue or inflate their role within achievements.

We know that some staff can use the right language and “talk the talk” but long-term delivery is important.

Some candidates are less than truthful about their experiences and abilities.

Other survey respondents opined that given the subjective nature of the interview regime, it would be better to replace it with a practical component requiring applicants to perform a school-related task for appraisal by the selection panel:

I would like to see a performance in the classroom as an addition to the recruitment process...

There is little or no indication of observable evidence of how a candidate connects with students, staff and community.

EVIDENCE not talk is needed.

The inability of principals to objectively assess merit may be linked to the amount of NSWDE-initiated merit selection training they had received. Indeed, an online option-button survey question requiring principals to indicate the number of merit selection training-hours they had completed is

presented in Table 6. This data demonstrates that the vast majority of principals in this study had received limited professional training regarding the administration of the NSWDE merit selection process (41%, n=71). Indeed, 56% (n=98) of respondents indicated that they had received only two hours or less in-service training prior to leading the merit selection process in their respective schools.

Table 6. How much merit selection training has been completed by principals?

Response	Frequency	%
None	27	15.4
1-2 hours	71	40.6
3-4 hours	40	22.9
5+ hours	37	21.1

n = 175 (16 non-attempts)

RQ2: What role do non-merit variables play in the selection of school leaders?

Principals completed an open-ended survey question to specify the extent to which non-merit variables (NMVs) such as personality, age, gender and ethnicity influenced their in-school leadership recruitment decisions. As can be seen in Table 7, the generation of frequency data revealed that non-merit factors played a significant role in the merit-based decision making of NSWDE principals whilst appointing middle-level school leaders to their leadership teams.

Table 7. Do non-merit variables (NMVs) influence selection panel decisions?

Response	Frequency	%
NMVs influence deliberations	115	70
NMVs don't influence deliberations	47	29
Unsure	2	1

n = 164 (27 non-attempts)

Clearly the majority of principals in this research held the view that in-school deliberations for the selection of middle-level school leaders were heavily influenced by factors other than merit. Principals suggested that:

They are all important factors... these factors can contribute greatly to the merit of the candidate

Judgments are made at interviews based on gender, height and personality.

They are considered because an applicant must fit the environment and culture of the community and school.

Further to the above, an option-button entry question in the online survey also revealed that 68.6% of NSWDE principals (n=120) in this study also found it very difficult to exclude non-merit variables from their selection panel deliberations (see Table 8).

Table 8. Is it possible to exclude NMVs when recruiting new school leaders?

Response	Frequency	%
Definitely yes	16	9.1
Probably yes	39	22.3
Probably not	95	54.3
Definitely not	25	14.3

n=175 (26 non-attempts)

When asked to expand upon their reasoning for the option each had selected, principals' responses were coded and analysed by SPSS software to reveal three basic response-types. Firstly, the majority of respondents (n=103) held that it was human nature to be subjective and hence, it was not possible to exclude non-merit variables from the recruitment process. Alternatively, a smaller group (n=48) maintained that a strict adherence to selection criteria would facilitate greater objectivity in the assessment of potential leadership candidates. Whereas only one principal was unsure whether non-merit variables played any role in their previous merit selection experience (see Table 9).

Table 9. To what extent are non-merit variables factored into panel deliberations?

Response	Frequency	%
Human nature is subjective	103	67.8
Selection criteria / evidence enables objectivity	48	31.6
Unsure	1	0.6

n = 152 (39 non-attempts)

The role of human nature was highly prevalent in the principals' survey responses. Indeed, disclosure of the subjective nature of their merit selection practice was evident in responses such as:

We all have some bias whether we like it or not and we also bring prior knowledge to the table. These things are hard to ignore.

Many of the attitudes we carry with us are not overt but can influence our decision making – even if it's not acknowledged.

It's almost impossible to go into an interview situation without a preconceived idea of what will fit your requirements. And of course, lots of conveners have already made their decision before it gets to interview.

Additionally, one principal who participated in this study's interviews suggested that:

It is never going to be measurable – able to be taught or addressed as (selection) criteria, but there is a certain “it factor” that some people are able to radiate that can be the difference between being chosen or not. It's not as simple as saying “I have a gut instinct” about this applicant – but it is at times a compelling ingredient in the deliberation process. At times individual panel members will keep their feelings to themselves and modify their marking accordingly. On other occasions, the group will acknowledge it and use it in when making determinations.

(Female principal with 12 years' experience: urban location)

Clearly, this subjective approach to the selection of school leaders is not in keeping with the meritocratic ideal.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has explored some key inconsistencies associated with the merit selection of school leaders in NSW government schools. Advocates of merit selection maintain that every candidate has an equal chance of attaining a leadership position in what is purported to be the fairest way of building school management hierarchies (Hausser, 2013). Despite that claim, this research suggests that the notion of a “presumed objectivity of merit” (Foley & Williamson, 2019) is problematic. Further, it revealed that merit-based leadership recruitment in NSWDE schools is not always an objective, fair and equitable process.

Principals in this study indicated that non-merit variables were difficult to ignore in leadership recruitment decisions (Table 3). This was surprising given that systems justification theory (Jost et al., 2004) intimates that beneficiaries of merit selection are more likely to support it as a fair and legitimate procedure (Lambert et al., 2016). Nevertheless, their concerns accord with scholarship that has found implicit bias to be common in leadership recruitment regimes (Foley & Williamson, 2019). Indeed, research has revealed that managers often demonstrate an affinity for job applicants who are like themselves (Blackmore et al., 2006; Eagleson et al., 2000), are physically attractive (Desrumaux et al., 2009) or are deemed the best fit for their organisation (Palmer et al., 2016).

Clearly, recruitment outcomes based upon such variables run counter to the meritocratic ideal of objective selection on a level playing field.

Another inconsistency regarding the merit selection of school leaders is an assumption that principal-led recruitment panels were either unaffected by the interplay of non-merit variables or were objective enough to quarantine their subjectivities (Foley & Williamson, 2019)—suppositions shown to be baseless (Lenton et al., 2009; Pronin et al., 2004). A more likely influence on the school-based selection paradigm, however, is the quality and duration of principals' merit selection training. To that end, data in Table 6 highlight the need for more extensive and on-going professional training to enhance the ability of NSWDE principals to objectively identify merit despite the influence of non-merit variables.

This can be achieved by the adoption of a hybrid-training model (Todd et al., 2017) utilizing annual real-time, face-to-face workshops (as opposed to solitary online platforms). Principals would thereby have an opportunity to critically reflect upon and refresh their merit selection skills in an inclusive, collaborative, collegial environment facilitating the sharing of merit selection experience and expertise (Johnson et al., 2000).

Further, the survey data also indicated that principals in this study considered that human nature injected selection bias (see Table 9). This accords with research findings indicating that even those individuals who overtly endorsed egalitarian values, inadvertently made stereotypical associations based upon implicit (or unconscious) bias in the recruitment context (Devine et al., 2012; Foley & Williamson, 2019; Van Nunspeet et al., 2015; Washington & Kelly, 2016).

In order to eliminate implicit bias, all government school principals should be required to undertake bias awareness training, the underlying premise of which holds that implicit selection bias is a habit that can be broken with practice (Devine et al., 2012; Foley & Williamson, 2019). Accordingly, a proven professional learning regime that could be utilized is one designed and implemented by Devine et al. (2012) who demonstrated the possibility of achieving dramatic, long-term reductions in levels of implicit bias amongst recruiters. Initially developed to reduce race bias during recruitment, this program up-skilled trainees in the use of multi-faceted habit-breaking intervention techniques. Since it equips participants with a wide range of bias reduction strategies, it could readily translate to any school-based merit selection setting to enhance the objectivity of both principals and their panels.

Another concern expressed by many principals in this study was their perception that the panel interview process was fraught with bias and subjectivity (see Table 5). Research has demonstrated that such bias can be markedly reduced by conducting several separate interviews rather than by an overall reliance on a panel (Bohnet, 2016). Given that interview panels often comprise influential individuals who dominate group discussion, there is always a risk that their views may propagate bias and “group-think” (Fontana & Frey, 1998) within the entire panel. Thus, this strategy therefore affords individual panel members with opportunities to participate in a series of

one-on-one interviews, develop rapport with each candidate and draw their own selection conclusions (Nankervis et al., 2014) prior to reconvening as a panel. Panelists would then table and defend their selection decisions as required to determine a consensus candidate.

Whilst it hasn't been externally evaluated, another possible way to further minimize interview subjectivity and bias could be provided by the emerging field of artificial intelligence (AI). Research conducted by Stockholm's KTH Royal Institute of Technology in association with AI company, "Furhat Robotics", has resulted in the trial of the world's first robot capable of conducting bias-free job interviews (Savage, 2019). Tengai the robot has conducted multiple test interviews during its trial period engaging with a diverse range of recruiter-volunteers to "learn" as many selection behaviours as possible in order to counteract the narrow influence of its programmers (Savage, 2019).

Tengai, unlike traditional robots, has been designed to mimic speech patterns and subtle facial expressions as well as to deliver interview questions in an identical manner, tone and order. The obvious advantage of utilizing this is that unlike human recruiters, robots don't succumb to unconscious bias regarding non-merit variables such as age, gender or ethnicity. Hence, Tengai interviews and records applicants thereby allowing interview transcripts to be analyzed by human recruiters using only the words on the page to ascertain whether interviewees should move on to the next phase of recruitment. Interestingly, Tengai has conducted real job interviews throughout 2019 (Savage, 2019).

Another selection strategy that could be incorporated into the NSWDE merit selection paradigm is the elimination of interviews from the merit selection process entirely. A principal-recruitment trial conducted by Wildy, Pepper and Guanzhong (2011) in conjunction with the Western Australia Education Department has demonstrated that recruiters are able to dispense with traditional interviews, relying instead upon an applicant's curriculum vitae, written referee reports and a school-based performance-based task. Wildy et al. (2011) were able to quantitatively rate each of these components using predetermined standards-based assessment criteria to determine if applicants should be placed in a "pool" awaiting an offer of a principal's position during the following twelve-month period. This empirically tested recruitment regime should be further explored by the NSWDE given that it markedly reduced the impact of subjective selection practice and provided selection panels with an opportunity to observe how prospective leadership candidates operated in a given school context.

The principals in this study revealed that their merit selection practice is, more often than not, a subjective process fraught with implicit bias. This perspective is problematic given that the culture of the NSWDE has long embraced an unshakable belief in the meritocratic ideal and its associated checks and balances. The preceding data has demonstrated that this narrative doesn't reflect the reality of middle-level school leadership recruitment practice in NSWDE schools. Additionally, it also highlights the challenge for the NSWDE to modify its merit selection regime to produce more objective and equitable recruitment outcomes for all school leadership applicants. Finally, whilst the

inherent nature of implicit bias in the merit selection practices of NSWDE principals may be difficult to eliminate entirely, there is much evidence in scholarly literature revealing that its merit selection protocols (policies and procedures) can be positively modified to produce a fairer and more objective recruitment regime – an outcome than can only be achieved if the NSWDE commits to a long term evaluation of its middle level school leadership merit selection practice.

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