Scaling the Mountain to Principalship
Janet, a first time principal, who wanted to do something about the “kids falling through the cracks”
My background and context

Samantha Mortimer

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Abaida Mahmood’s (September, 2015) visual metaphor of the barriers in a women’s life to achieving leadership positions
Who is Janet?

• Janet is a fifth generation teacher in New Zealand and “teaching was in the blood”
• she liked to “use the red pen” while playing games
• Trained as a primary school teacher
• Worked in an intermediate then a high school
• Worked her way up from Dean, AP, DP
• Moved to a bigger school as a DP
• Then back to her previous school as principal
Barriers - Whānau and Motherhood

• Janet found that whānau/family acted as a barrier to her career development, especially at a specific time in her career.

• Janet remarked, "I could be a DP (deputy principal) standing on my head"

• However, she placed her “professional self-actualization in the back seat” (Hansen, 2014, p. 20)
• On balance Janet felt it more important to put time into her role as mother while her daughter was still living at home.

• She also recognised that Principalship “does put pressure on relationships, marriages”.

• “I would never recommend it [principalship] if you have little children”.
Enablers - Passion for Social Justice

• Family values from her parents as her moral “guiding compass” (Lyman. Strachan, & Lazaridou, 2012, p. 83).

• True passion for her community and that society “can’t have any more kids falling through the cracks and doing nothing”.

• This included her own family members as she had “a niece and a nephew in this town who walked out of school aged 15...have done nothing and receive the dole [employment benefit]”.
Enablers - Personal and Professional Support

• “It’s good to have a supportive husband”.

• Janet reminisced “it was nice that a lot of teachers had their children there, had that empathy and quite often one of us would go and pick up four kids, while their mothers were still working”.

Enablers - Mentors and professional learning opportunities

• Janet was given “professional endorsement” (Young & McLeod, 2001, p. 485) by two mentors who encouraged her and gave her confidence to apply for promotions on her rise to principalship.

• “He believed in me, I didn’t believe in me but he did. Whatever he saw in me, I don’t know to this day, he got me to go to the [university] course. I wouldn’t have gone myself, I wouldn’t have thought that I should go to something like that…”

• Opportunity to be an Acting Principal
  “It wasn’t a reality, I was only babysitting ... I wasn’t carrying the can for anything”. She was just “keeping the seat warm”.
TURNING POINTS - WHEN IDENTITY AND CIRCUMSTANCES COLLIDE

• Up to the point right before she became a principal Janet was “put off a little bit by being a principal. I don’t really know what put me off or why I changed my mind of being a principal but I really wanted to keep in contact with the kids”.

• She also said, “I lost my confidence that I could actually be a principal and one of the reasons for that was going to deputy principal conferences [which were] very heavily male.”
Collision of circumstances

1. Janet had just finished being Acting Principal
2. Her daughter was about to leave home
3. A principal position became available in the hometown where she had “taught both the parents and their children”.
4. She knew that the time was right and “It was like, well, maybe I could do this”.
5. Janet applied and was given the job - when the activism truly began
Figure 1. Samantha Mortimer’s visual metaphor of Janet’s barriers and enablers (drawn by Jenni Baylis).
Parallels with my own life

- It was definitely a confidence thing for me too!
- I also know that I can be an AP “standing on my head”! I have done nearly everything now - I now even feel confident with finances
- It took me a long time to find a good mentor - I looked but no-one was interested!
- I also have to make decisions based on my whole family - my husband’s job, my children’s schooling, they are older but they still need me around.

Therefore, I am leaving my “professional self-actualization in the back seat” for now

- I had an interview for a local school for a principal position - but my heart wasn’t in it - the last 2 principals from there left principalship altogether - I trusted my gut
- My doctorate is something to keep me interested
Links to my doctoral work

My current overall doctoral research question is:

• **How might beginning teachers form their professional identities in New Zealand secondary schools?**

• How do schools support or perhaps limit these?
• Although the focus is on beginning teachers it is through a leadership lens
• Interestingly I am using metaphors including visual metaphors and identity in this study as well