Jane Baskwill
Lawrencetown, Nova Scotia

Jane’s Journal

A summer gathering of friends and acquaintances, mostly teachers. We sit in groups around the pool in my neighbor’s back yard. The barbeque is going and the smell of steaks and hamburgers mixes with the smell of chlorine and sunscreen. Several guests are discussing issues of difference between women and men and their various abilities to express emotion. There is a back and forth repartee about ‘male talk’ and ‘female talk’ and reference is made to men ‘really being from Mars and women from Venus’. One woman remarks that she and a friend discussed these very issues several days before and they decide, of all their male friends, the man seated next to her is the only one of their group who is capable of ‘getting in touch with his feminine side.’ Laughter and more comments erupt from others within earshot.

There are remarks from the men about having to watch out for this guy now and about not wanting to have him sleep in their tent at an up-coming camping trip. The women tease him about showing his ‘female’ side. One woman keeps pursuing this idea in an effort to convince him, amid his protestations, that women see him as a ‘sensitive guy.’ Another woman asks if ‘guys’ talk about anything else but sports, tools, or beer. She says she wonders if they ever express how they feel. A man comments, “Of course we do. We say, ‘I feel hungry!’” There is a lot of laughter and good-natured teasing throughout this conversation. All is in ‘good fun,’ however, I am reminded of many other conversations I have heard/had, with/between friends, colleagues, and acquaintances around this very same idea of inscribed differences between women and men.

I listen to conversations around me
Struggle with the ‘common sense’ views held
about ‘women’
about ‘men’
held in many social circles in Nova Scotia.
I wrestle with my frustrations
with gender binary viewpoints
with the perpetuation of the notion
of ‘women’s ways’
of ‘men’s ways’
of both ways, strongly embedded in the everyday
in educational administration.
In Nova Scotia
Issues around gender remain
predominantly fixed
with/in an oppositional gendered dualism. (59-60)[3]

Representation of educational research is partly about power and how relations of power are produced. It is about institutional power that limits or enlarges the space(s) in which educational research may be reported. It is about power ‘over,’ the power the researcher has by virtue of her position in the academy and the power the participant has in the way she chooses to represent herself to the researcher. It is about the power to ‘make knowledge’ and how access is either encouraged or restricted. And it is about the power of the text to either limit meaning making or expand its possibilities (Gadamer, 1975).

Lather (1991) points out: “[E]mancipatory knowledge increases awareness of the contradictions distorted or hidden by everyday understandings (52).” Smith (1987) underlines that this view of the world is one-sided and yet it appears as natural and without question. This way of thinking is so a part of the social fabric that it often goes unnoticed by both men and women.

I recognized from the outset of the research process that I was in a unique position. At the same time as being a researcher, I was also a woman elementary school principal and thus, a member of the group I was interested in researching.

I, therefore, entered into the research enterprise with what Gadamer (1975) refers to as a “fore-understanding.” With this mindfulness, I actively sought ways to reclaim the way in which knowledge was created and reported in educational leadership/administration and sought alternative ways to generate and represent the data. Principal/practitioner/research, influenced by Feminism(s), Hermeneutics, and Postmodernism became a unique opportunity through which to explore how identity/ies are constructed.

For Bruner (1986), “The power of writing a narrative lies in the ordering of the experiences of others, in tracing connections between cause and consequences, continuity and change” (46). In tracing those “connections” I found I was unable to separate those scripts that governed my life at home from those that governed my life at work. I saw them as scenes within the same scripts. And yet I also recognized there were additional storylines at play or, perhaps, other versions of the same story, adapted for work and for home. I reflected on how often I had re-written myself into one part or another depending on my audience. I had re-scripted myself as teacher, administrator, student. In addition, there were other scripts that were my ‘family’ scripts around my-self as wife, mother, sister, and daughter. There were animal scripts, artist scripts, author scripts, and travel scripts.

Each re-scripting represented my-self and others in a somewhat different way and caused me to connect my-self with others in new and interesting ways. As I sought to make explicit the scripts that had influenced the way in which I wrote my life, I became curious as to those that influenced others. I wondered what scripts my colleagues enacted as they carried out the work of the principal. I wondered, in particular, about women principals and how they had been able to extricate themselves from undesirable ‘scripts.’ Bruner (1987) holds that “a life as led is inseparable from a life as told…not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold” (31). The more fully we explore how our lives are scripted, the more re-scripting of our lives, both at work and at home, we are able to do.
Jane's Journal

Who "controls" the principal's performance? Is it the government who through legislation writes the principal into the education text? Is it the principal as she carries out her day-to-day work-as-she-sees-it, whatever that is? Is it the teachers upon whose judgment to which the principal is subject? Is it the parents who exercise their "control" through school advisory councils or home and school associations or through lobbying and public pressure?

There are so many ways in which what I do is effected positively or negatively by the will of others. How much of what I do is simply covering-my-ass? I remember my friend and colleague Ralph Peterson's words to me when he heard I had taken my first principalship: "Pick the battles you know you can win." At the time, I found his advice puzzling. I believed I could make a difference in education. I believed parents and teachers would appreciate my contribution. I created a fantasy scenario in which my school was the best in the province by virtue of my efforts. After all, I was an excellent teacher, I knew what good teaching meant and I would be an excellent principal.

All it took was a phone call from the superintendent a few weeks into my new job (he had received a call from a parent) to wake me up to the fact that I was not the only one who would control my performance. I would also later discover though many others would evaluate my performance, I would not be permitted to officially contribute to my evaluation.

Our selves
as daughters
as wives
as mothers
as sisters
as teachers
as principals
as researchers
Working-lives-as-lived
Working-lives-as-told
multiple scripts of our own and others’ making ambiguities contradictions
The gendered nature of a woman elementary principal’s work in Nova Scotia. (77-78)

Jane's Journal

There are times when I think that maybe I look for issues of gender where none actually exist. But then I look at the dwindling number of women principals or read a parent’s comment in a note left for me that the Acting Vice-Principal (who just happens to be male) is preferred to the female VP, or watch the way in which the women principals in some Boards are treated by the senior administrative staff and I am sure gender has a lot to do with almost everything.

I catch myself being sucked in to thinking that I am on a level playing field with my male colleagues. I begin to think that the struggles I have are because of my personality, or my short-comings or because I truly wasn’t the best candidate. I make excuses for Them by saying They have a lot on their mind, or I probably didn’t make myself clear, or maybe I misunderstood. But all it takes to bring me back to my original thinking that these are all gender related issues is an administrator’s meeting or a committee meeting.
As I sit back and try to record who speaks and how long, I find those who speak, and speak most often, are overwhelmingly male. And males speak by far the longest; up to ten minutes at a time in some cases. The jokes that are told in the back row are about women. Principals of the largest high schools are men. Those in power in Central Office are men. And so I wonder: “Am I imagining all this?”

In a western society that does not readily allow the expression of emotion, it is particularly difficult, especially in the field of educational administration, to express the emotional turmoil that is part of the day-to-day reality of the principalship. It is difficult for women (and some men) to respond to the emotionally charged changes of school restructuring and reform while, at the same time, maintaining the appearance of ‘effective leadership’ which calls for leaders to manage their ‘negative’ emotions while being supportive and encouraging of those with whom they work (see also Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). Firmly entrenched in educational administration is the rational/emotional binary, viewing the former as the mode of the effective administrator. In addition, Blackmore (1996) also argues that women in middle management positions are the “emotional managers” of educational reform and that this positioning exacts high personal costs on women’s lives and health when their work conditions do not support such work.

It is difficult to tune in to the emotional side of a person’s being. However, by using various art forms, it becomes possible to re-connect with the emotional signals in ourselves or in others that have been ignored or thought to be a weakness or a defect. The artistic (re)-presentations of women principals and their work that I used become the “telling” symbols of which Glaser (1978) speaks and provide a form that “expresses meaning” rather than states it (Dewey, 1934). Writers of mainstream educational leadership/administration take a seemingly ‘objective’ and ‘impartial’ stance producing meaning for the reader. The arts enable multiple meanings to be made with the reader/viewer.

In my research, mask making, as representations of my analysis of interviews with women elementary principals, becomes a powerful tool for the communication of ideas that might otherwise not be heard if put into more traditional form.

**Jane’s Journal**

*Throughout university I explored various art forms—painting, sculpture, drama—in my courses though I seldom did anything with them that wasn’t related to teaching and the classroom. I never connected this part of my self with my new professional self. I seldom explored my thinking about my work through these art forms. They were tools for classroom use, techniques to be taught to students. I never considered the arts would become an integral part of my inquiry process and of the research itself.

Nor did I consider the importance I would place on reflection—that of my own, as researcher and that on the part of participants. It wasn’t until I was well into this unanticipated process of reflection in my research—a blurring of the boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’—that I re-turned to where I began, before teaching, before principaling. I returned, full circle, to use Art to express what I could see and feel but was unable to adequately put into words.*
As the idea of making masks took form in my imagining, I felt excited and energized by this phase of the research process in a way I had not been previously. I set to work. *The Mask of Administration* was molded from my own face using plaster of Paris bandaging material. On its surface I glued segments of the *Education Act* that described the duties and responsibilities of the principal. I made the hair by putting the documents through the shredder and hot gluing the long strips to the molded form, giving the mask a wild look.

Throughout the making of this mask I felt I was engaged in an act of ultimate defiance. I was defacing a sacred document: The *Education Act*—the ‘law.’ I took delight in what felt like a subversive act. The mask was an inside joke played on the ‘system.’

*The Mask of Administration* also symbolized for me the way I had had to camouflage the identity of the principals such that they became dis-embodied participants in this research. So that my use of their words would not do them harm, they had to remain ‘faceless.’ However, by creating masks as another way to represent my analysis of the data, I was able to give them form and life. I was also able to externalize the dilemmas of representation and have “re-imagined” (Neilsen, 1998) masks as a form of textual representation.

The use of mask-as-metaphor is not new. There have been other writers (Anzaldua, 1990; Brunner, 1998; Kristeva, 1992) who use ‘mask’ as a metaphor for the social construction of identity. For them, masks represent a “false face” that conceals or idealizes the subject. It is their intent to relocate identity to that which happens “between the masks” as a “self-reflexive moment”; (a) seminal moment(s) in identity-making. It is suggested that this can be done through self-reflexivity by creating opportunities to create narratives that displace the traditional. By bringing forth “dangerous” memories (Brunner, 1998, 60) and rethinking the myths of experience, “self in community can forge political and cultural practices that alter social realities” (Brunner, 1998, 60).

I have focused, as a part of this research, on the art of the mask and its power to represent visually the affective knowledge gathered during the interview process. I was influenced by the way in which masks have been used by Northern Indigenous Peoples as a means of sharing personal history and experiences. Village elders created symbols in order that the meaning with/in the masks would be passed on from one generation to the next. Throughout history and in many cultures, masks have been used to transform the person wearing them (Nunley, 1999). Masked, a person was thought to be able to work magic spells, be protected against evil, assert social status, and satirize or amuse. A mask concealed the everyday self and invoked a supernatural element.

In Mexican Indian culture, the face reflected the soul and the intrinsic nature of the wearer.
Covering the face with a mask temporarily removed one’s identity from the everyday world and substituted a new reality and persona. To be masked privileged the wearer, protecting subjectivity and privatizing individual identity. Being masked displaced meaning from who one was to how one behaved. In this view, there was a belief in a ‘true’ identity. The wearer of the mask became more than he/she was before. It was the mask that changed the behavior of the individual wearing it.

However, for many of the indigenous peoples of North America, village elders created masks to record their history, tell stories or share their personal experiences, and pass on vast knowledge to the next generation. They did this by using symbols to represent their knowledge. The process of traditional mask making was so designed such that the purpose, use, and stories behind the masks would remain for generations. The masks were part of the mythology of the people. They were the icons that created part of the glue that held the mythology/culture together and created coherence. It was this use of masking to which I could relate most.

As such the masks I created became part of my own personal mythology surrounding my work as principal and the representation of that work and the work of others.

Masking[4]

An “alterative”[5] way of knowing in a field that traditionally relies on
the ‘rational’
the ‘logical’
the ‘objective’
The mask becomes
a mirror
a chrysalis
a waiting place
a hiding place

Masks give courage. (166)

Jane’s Journal

I find the process of making masks very much like the way I write. First, I ruminate over the idea of what I want the mask to represent, playing around in my mind with how I imagine the mask will look. Then I decide on the materials and the general shape of the piece. Next I reach a point where I feel I have to get on with the ‘making.’ I get impatient and feel unsettled. I can’t think about anything else. It is at this point that I set about working with the materials.

As the mask takes shape it seems to develop a character of its own. Some of its character comes from the materials themselves and some from the audio transcript that runs in my mind of the principal I have interviewed. Through the transcript I get a ‘sense’ of the ‘texture’ of this principal layered over the ‘texture’ of the materials. It is at this point that the mask comes alive!

Writers often talk about how a character in a novel seems to take on a life of its own and determine its own direction. Characters start to act in unexpected ways as the writing changes the more the writer gets to know the character. The same seemed true of each mask. Like the character in a novel, the mask seemed to share more of its character with me during the process becoming more of me than by me.

Masks-as-metaphor
form in my-mind’s-eye
exciting
energizing
transform textual representation

Masks-as-art,
The art of the principal.

with its power to represent
to share personal history and experiences
  symbols evoke/provoke
  meaning with/in (168)

Jane's Journal
Like the principal-at-work, the principal-as-artist makes many decisions with regard to each piece of art: to place this here, to move this there, to use this material or that, this form or another. But unlike the principal-at-work who makes her decisions in a rapid-fire manner, the principal-as-artist makes her decisions slowly, painstakingly, sometimes tentatively, knowing she can always rework her piece if she makes a mistake or changes her mind. In comparison, this work seems to take place in slow motion, allowing the maker to develop a relationship with the materials. It is this relationship out of which each piece is born.

Masks of my own
Made with/for others
  from personal mythology/ies
  from my/our work
    as principals
    as women
Each mask a representation
  of relationships
  of forces
  of pushes and pulls
Each mask embodies the person in the position. (169)

I made eight masks (in addition to The Mask of Administration), one for each of the eight women whose transcripts I had chosen to work with. As I listened repeatedly to the tape recordings of the interviews, the visual images I had became clearer and clearer. I sketched my ‘impressions’ for each and listed possible materials I could use. I constructed most masks using my face as the mold. Each mask was a representation not only of the transcribed interview but also of my experience during the interview. Instead of constructing categories and themes, or verses of poetic prose, I worked with plaster, clay, wood, and paper.

Young (1998) says of his masks: “I want the masks to transport the viewer to places we don’t need to understand (and may not be able to) but do need to experience.” In relating this to my research I discovered that creating masks enabled me to represent my thinking about the data. It seemed fitting to use this ancient art form to ‘give face’ to the otherwise anonymous ‘informants.’ The masks afforded them protection but also gave face to their voices as I heard them.

These masks thus became “Talking Heads”[6] which gave me the power to replace one ‘reality’ with another—the principal-of-the-literature with the principal-of-the-everyday.
Through the masks I was better able to explore the emotions of the relationships, the forces, the pushes and pulls and the person in the otherwise faceless position. The creation of the masks afforded yet another way to place critical points of tension between the principal of the literature and each individual principal as I ‘knew’ her. Later, when used as an integral part of a staged performance, the masks became both symbol and metaphor of the complexities surrounding research with others.

These Masks, I thought, as part of educational research, were visual reminders for me that there was no one absolute Truth and that by ‘masking’ the research process and the researcher’s role in that process, the researcher/the participant/the reader was able to know herself better. Ironically, the fact that most masks were made using my own face as the mold, again raised the issue of the researcher’s presence in the work and foregrounded that presence visually as well as through the writing.

The style and decoration which adorned each mask took its meaning from the expression, emotion, and responses of the participant as seen through my own subjectivity. For me the masks represent a signification of self/ves: a representation of those aspects of each woman’s identity/ies that might seldom be seen in public. Instead of being masks that hid, these are masks that revealed.

The masks are a way to speak-without-speaking of the vulnerabilities, the insecurities; the hidden, private side of a public ‘role.’ I remained uncomfortable with exposing that which is not fully mine to public scrutiny. I, therefore, decided to signal this intermixing of self-and-other through the masks; with my face-form as a visual reminder of my active presence in this work. With the creation of the masks, I represented my/our vulnerabilities, struggles and tensions. These were the faces of the vulnerable, the uncertain. They portrayed the ‘softer’ side. These were qualities not readily sought by school boards. These were the faces that sought support, who questioned their own leadership skill, who recognized their limitations and those of others. These masks represented the contradictions and the ambiguities and the secret vulnerabilities of individuals within the role.

As I looked more closely at the masks and ‘lived’ with each, I saw more of their resemblance to myself. With each of these masks I was reflecting on my own experiences as a researcher and as a principal. Not only in that I had used my face upon which to mold most masks, but as well I had reflected those qualities in each woman which most resonated with me at the time. It was as if, despite the part they had played during the interview, I had also seen what they and others might consider to be the ‘flaws’ in their ‘character,’ the self/ves they had tried to keep hidden from the public. These would not be considered to be the attributes of an ‘effective’ principal.

During each interview I was able to glimpse multiple and sometimes conflicting/conflicted self/ves as each shared the events of their lives and their work. I was a confidante and yet a conspirator. We shared a common ‘secret.’ It was that hidden aspect of our-selves-in-role that we had in common. I felt a kinship. We were kindred spirits in what, otherwise, was a very lonely role. This feeling of having had a shared experience linked me with each of the women principals and yet I still recognized that each in her own way was unique, as was I. I was not them and they were not me. There were no universal truths to be learned here. No generalizable characteristics to be shared. Each enacted the principal’s role very differently in her day-to-day work. As a researcher, the way in which I chose to represent that analysis limits or expands the multiple points of tension generated.

**On Leadership: Helen[7]**
“I’ve had nicknames forever. That’s what happens when you get in leadership and are a woman I guess. It doesn’t matter what you do there’s still the nicknames. Circles of men jeer and sneer at you. They make you paranoid to speak. You feel self-conscious, nervous, less confident. You wouldn’t believe the things I’ve been told! “You’re taking jobs from the men!” Imagine, in this day and age! But it’s the nicknames: Lady Di, Ball Crusher, Barbie. Why? What men are called these things? I think women really need to rally around one another, show we are smarter, show we are not going to play those kinds of games. We need to show we value one another, women and men, show professional respect, and thank people for their point of view. I’m a believer in David and Goliath. The meek shall inherit the earth. The kinder, more gentle way, should be respected or imitated, not mocked. When all is said and done I’m just a leader. I’m a talker and a doer. I’ve been leading all my life.”

I took a different approach to Helen’s mask. I did not use a plaster mold of my face. I think it was because I least identified with her point of view. It was as if I wanted to separate myself from her and yet there were connections and feelings that I recognized we both shared. In this mask I represented the multiple and conflicting/conflicted selves that emerged from our overlay of experiences as women principals: those of warrior and peacekeeper.

Helen had been ridiculed and embarrassed by her teachers and administrator colleagues who thought, among other things, she was taking jobs from the men. She was subject to subtle, yet offensive, name-calling during staff meetings. She often felt self-conscious, nervous and less confident than she appeared. She took it all ‘on the chin’ and continued to smile and work through it, in spite of it.

I constructed Helen’s mask from a wooden serving bowl and glued a wooden candy dish to it to create some facial features. For me these represented Helen’s home and family focus and her ‘sugar coating’ of contentious issues. The mask has long synthetic hair in which a dove is nestled. Helen was the peacemaker. She would rather maintain the peace than tackle controversy head on. I struggled with my resistance to identify myself with Helen. Her belief that the “The meek shall inherit the earth” seemed the antithesis of my desire to challenge inequalities head on, and yet, I realized I had more in common with Helen than I had at first been willing to admit.

I knew what it was like to have staff whisper in the halls or make comments to each other rather than to me. I knew what it was like to feel inadequate and uncomfortable dealing with the aggressive tendencies of some of my more powerful male colleagues. I knew what it meant to feel responsible for the children in my care—all the children—and how lonely and emotionally draining that work can be. I recognized quite clearly how much easier it is to keep the peace by not challenging teacher beliefs and attitudes directly but by working behind the scenes on my own agenda.

As I worked on Helen’s mask, and the mask in turn shifted my understanding of who I am in relation with others, I came to the realization, I am not so different after all. I wondered about how principals and teachers interact with each other and the level of trust that is actually possible within a hierarchical system. Will such a system inevitably be ‘us against them’ and perpetuate whispers in the hallways? And, like Helen, I wondered the degree to which gender is a factor in the expectations teachers hold about what women principals are capable of, what they are to do and how they are to act? According to Davies and Harre, (2004)

Once having taken up a particular position as one’s own, a person inevitably sees the world in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines, and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. (3)

Jane’s Journal

I was at yet another meeting where I am asked to make a decision about staffing without having the necessary information. The Regional Leadership Team (a group of senior administrators at the Central Office level who make the final decisions
regarding staffing, budget, and the overall workings of the school region) has the
details on each issue and an overall knowledge of how one piece fits into another.
They seem to have a direction in which they are dragging the rest of us. This group
is made up only of men; men with power who seem to listen to some principals and
not to others, while at other times, they seem to listen only to themselves.

I wrestle with wanting to ‘obey the rules’ but watch others circumvent them. Some
of the men in our group routinely “bend” the rules without breaking them, while
others just outright break them. That is not to say the women don’t, but if they do
it has been less obvious. When I decide to try one of their tactics, I find myself
agonizing over the decision. I feel guilty and worry over “getting caught.” I wrestle
with the morality of such a decision, and feel like a child who has dared to do
something a bit on the edge and relishes the thrill. But then I become fearful of
reprisals, and feel like I did when I was a teenager. Just like then I know I will have
to answer to my ‘father.’

I hear the insider talk, watch the camaraderie, and notice those on the fringe and
those on the outside. I know that more is going on than meets the eye, but I can’t
put my finger on just what that might be. There are small groups among the larger
group who meet in the hallways or the parking lot. Sometimes I am one of those in
just such a group. Some make regular pilgrimages to the superintendent or to
Central Office. Some do not. I don’t have much time for that sort of thing. Maybe I
should take time. It is awfully hard to play the game when you don’t know all the
rules; especially if a new set of rules comes out without you knowing it. When that
happens I can only hope I do a better job the next time or that the next set of rules
will be more suited to my style of play. I wonder what would happen if I made the
rules?

Who Am I? Elizabeth

“I see myself differently on different days; some days a teacher, others a
protector, still others an advocate for the children. I see my responsibility as
doing my best, to advocate for better services, better teaching, better support. I
make so many decisions: Is this good for kids? And yet there are so many
forces from outside the school that cause me to have to compromise what I
believe in. It takes a tremendous amount of emotional energy to decide what’s
necessary, what’s fair. I don’t know where it comes from sometimes but I
always seem to find the energy. I cut a corner here or there and make things
happen. But, all in all, it takes its toll on a person. I am not the person I was
when I first took this job!”[9]

When I first began working on Elizabeth’s mask I had several
images in mind. I was struck by her feistiness, her outspoken
manner, her uncompromising integrity, along with the way
she spoke of her role as protector and advocate. Yet, despite
these strengths, I could feel, along with her, the weight of
endless responsibilities. She was at once strong and yet also
vulnerable.

I was surprised at the level at which I connected to the intensity of her feelings and the images
they evoked. I struggled with this mask for a long time. I had used my face as the mold on
which to apply the plaster gauze. I assembled an assortment of other materials: a brown
wooden bowl, silver raffia, and a collection of electronic bits and pieces. I sprayed the mask
and bowl to match the raffia hair and began ‘wiring.’

An unsettling dichotomy emerged. I saw myself and yet I heard Elizabeth. I realized I was
exploring my own beliefs and experiences as well as those whose stories intersected with my
own during the interviews. In some respects the image was pleasing and yet unsettling,
familiar and strange. I glimpsed my-self as others might see me.
Davies and Hare (2004) put it this way:

[W]ho one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one’s own and other’s discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others’ lives. (3)

*Jane’s Journal*

A metaphor that comes to mind with respect to the principalship is that being a principal is like being a mainframe computer; having information on a host of things at the ready should it be needed. It is being connected to any number of others to access information, as well as dispense it. It requires making decisions and offering suggestions based on an interpretation of the data present. It means monitoring life support as well as speed and velocity.

Having said this, I am also mindful that even computers can malfunction and are ‘only’ machines. Likewise, though principals are seemingly invincible and often seem to be impassive, they are vulnerable, subject to life-threatening ‘viruses,’ networked to others, dependent on the data inputted, subject to human error!

As I continue thinking about this metaphor, I wonder what the implications would be if teachers were to view the principal in this way? Is this the ‘image’ I project to staff? Do they see me as capable of doing everything? Do they see me as distant from them? Do they see me as the one from whom to expect the ‘right’ answer? Do they see me as a machine without feeling?

*It’s Not Easy: Sylvia*

It’s not easy being a manager of people, an accountant, a lawyer, a nurse, a social worker, a coordinator of everyone’s efforts, a peacekeeper, a disciplinarian, an innovator, a counselor, a role-model, a nurturer. It’s a glorified motherhood kind of role. You’re busy with small interests, the day-to-day running of the school with its problems and conflicts. You try to establish a way all of you can live together. It’s not easy being Mother all of the time.

Sylvia’s mask was a new venture both artistically and conceptually. She was a pioneer in the realm of politics as well as education. In her, I saw an archetypal matriarch, mother to all. I had the persistent image of an archeological dig uncovering her mask. I decided to work in clay. As the mask dried it cracked and a piece of it broke off. At first I was disappointed and thought I should redo the mask or at best glue it back together until I remembered my archeology image. Sylvia’s mask became an artifact. I painted her mask and nestled it on a bed of raffia, inside a decorated hat box.

My connection to Sylvia was a strong one—as a wife, as a mother, as a colleague. I, too, had felt the burden of motherhood, especially in school, where I was expected to look after everyone’s emotional needs while keeping my own in check.

I thought about how teachers don’t expect women leaders to argue, get angry, make demands, or voice a strong opinion. Women are expected (and expect themselves) to be able to ‘do it all’ both at home and at work. Trying to be a ‘superwoman’ takes its toll on one’s health. In
elementary schools most of the staff are women. They have learned the lessons of society all too well and set high expectations of themselves and other women with whom they work. When those expectations aren’t met, they feel let down, betrayed, abandoned by the very women who they look to for support and guidance, the mother figure of the school community, the principal. As Sylvia says, “It’s not easy being Mother all of the time.”

Jane’s Journal

Today was one of the worst days I have ever had as a principal. The directions at the meeting were clear—deliver the lay-off notices in these envelopes by the end of the school day. The powers-that-be suggested we support the teacher by ensuring her class was covered and by giving her an opportunity to go home for the rest of the day. Sounds simple enough and a compassionate thing to do—except that we had seven teachers on probationary contracts who would receive the letter. Within the ninety minutes before the end of school, the vice principal and I would have to find other staff to take each class, bring them to a comfortable and private location, give them their letter and arrange for them to leave the building if they wished.

The teachers knew the letter was coming, had prepared themselves they thought, and yet when they saw the VP at their doors each was faced with the reality of it all. Amid tears and shouts of anguish and frustration along with stoic acceptance, each teacher dealt with the letter in his or her own way. The VP and I tried to be supportive—whatever that is. Support is something principals are supposed to know how to give.

So, here I am again, expected to be strong, impervious to emotion, supportive, caring but impassive. I am expected to do my job and deliver the letters, mop up, and return to school tomorrow as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. Not only that but I get to do the whole thing again when the courier brings the letters for the six permanent contract teachers we have. Some days this job sucks!

The Balancing Act: Leslie

So I guess I see the role as a balancing act, balancing teaching and principaling. I am constantly trying to deal with what I am supposed to be doing and also trying to have some kind of comfortable climate or environment where people do share and where they do collaborate and some how or other I can support them. I ask myself “What am I supposed to be doing with the kids? What am I supposed to be doing with the adults? It’s my biggest struggle, managing all this. I feel like I am dancing on my toes, trying to keep people happy. If you’re going to be a teacher in this role you have to be some kind of model for them and that’s difficult too, because we’re only human and we make lots of mistakes”

I came away from listening to Leslie’s interview with a Cirque Du Soliel image of a tight-rope walker. She saw the principalship as being a constant balancing act between doing what was best for children and what policy or parent groups might demand. I searched for materials that would evoke a stylized circus-like quality yet would capture the strong emotional turmoil with which I connected.

I found a Halloween glow-in-the-dark hockey mask that suited my purpose perfectly. To it I glued glow-in-the-dark stars and shapes. A cascade of tears falls from one eye. Again I felt a strong connection to the whole issue of balance, as a wife, a mother, a teacher, and a principal. I identified with the feelings of guilt Leslie shared as she wrestled the demands of school against those of home and family. The pressures of such a ‘juggling act’ causes tremendous stress. I recognized this stress in myself but also in the teachers as well. There are plans and back-up plans and schedules, calendars and organizers both at home and at school. Teachers seek support from principals yet expect principals to handle problems on their own. I knew the difficulty of walking the tightrope trying not to lose my balance. In this role, it is hard for
principals to be seen as human beings who sometimes make mistakes.

**Jane’s Journal**

*The role of principal is never straightforward or clearcut. As a principal, I often find myself under the umbrella of educational leadership. And yet, from that theoretical viewpoint, I am told principals are thought to be ineffective in bringing about educational change. At other times I am lead to believe that women principals are more suited to this work because of their commitment to communication, their nurturing and caring, and their social networking.*

I see myself in bits and pieces of the literature on educational leadership, organizational culture, the principalship, gender, but, for the most part, what I see is one of those cardboard cutouts of an exaggerated cartoon body. It has holes cut for a head and arms to poke through. The cardboard cutouts come in a variety of shapes, and sizes. Some are male and some are female. I poke my head through the arms of one…no, that’s not me. Then through another…still not me. Then another…there doesn’t seem to be a match with which I am satisfied.

**Outside Looking In: Claire**

*I feel I am on the outside, looking in. I am alone with no one supporting me. I know I am “in charge.” That’s what they pay me the big bucks for! But I didn’t realize it would be such a battle out there. Fighting for this and fighting for that. Fighting for the kids and fighting for the staff and fighting for the parents... or against them as the case may be. And when things get rough, and I'm out there standing in the thick of battle, there’s one thing I can be sure of. When I look behind me I’ll be all alone… fighting all by myself.*[13]

Claire is a capable and strong principal with many years experience as both a teacher and administrator. As she spoke about feeling alone in her struggles to find enough resources for her school, to solve problems, to deal with the bureaucracy and the pressures that faced her, I had the image of an embattled soldier, standing alone on the field. The image of Claire as the Lone Soldier startled and surprised me. I had not considered myself to be at war yet I identified with the intense feelings she projected. I struggled against identifying myself with anything war-like or military and yet this persistent image of ‘doing battle,’ alone, kept me awake at night. Claire’s mask was made from camouflage cloth for the headpiece glued to a pair of safety goggles upon which eyes had been painted.

The loneliness of the work, even amid many people, and the constant struggles to survive budget cuts, dissention, or one crisis or another, takes its toll on the body and the spirit. I thought about the many principals I knew who lived with migraine headaches and neck pain and those who often suffered from insomnia or stomach disorders. Though principals and staffs may work collaboratively and take a team approach, ultimately it is the principal who is held responsible for everything. Is it any wonder that fewer candidates are interviewing for administrative positions?

**Jane’s Journal**

*From the literature I glean words that expect the principal to work diligently and actively to restructure, transform, redefine, and yet I am expected to maintain order, stability, and the status quo while inspiring change. All around me I find political, economic, and social upheaval, and yet I must clarify goals and delegate responsibilities. I feel as though I am playing a part in someone else’s play. Just like the costumes in the dressing room, these theories of leadership are crafted for a particular performance. When one wears them, they contribute to the construction of the character, providing the wearer with the look of the principal-of-the-time. But now I see another trend in the literature. It is the “principal-as-savior.” It implies that if the principal is advocate enough, moral enough, learned enough, martyr enough then she will be able to save the children and, in thus doing, the*
world.

I put on this new costume but find it is too small. It constricts. If I try to move around too much I fear it will rip or the mask will fall off. I have a costume just like it in that trunk over there. But mine is missing a button and is worn about the knees and the elastic on the mask is over-stretched. When I put it on I find it still fits after all these years. I wonder what makes my old costume different from the new one? When I wear mine I don’t stand out as wearing anything new. I simply look like me doing what I consider to be my work, which has always been about children after all.

On the Rewards of the Job: Josie

“I’ve never looked to people outside the school to give me my rewards. My rewards come from right here, inside the school, from the kids and from the staff, but mainly from the kids. That’s what keeps me going. Now I don’t have to tell you what rocks are put in our way, but I try to come back to the school and say, “I can have an effect”. No matter how frustrating it gets, you can come back to this school and tell yourself “You can make a difference”. Even if it’s just in one child’s life, that’s what education is all about!”

Josie’s mask captures her view of her role as a protector of children. Once again, I could strongly identify with the sense of urgency and passion Josie projected around this part of the job. Once again I used my face as the mold for a plaster mask. The hair is made from long strips of coloured cloth and the face is painted showing the influence of native and aboriginal art. Just under the face is a dream catcher with Guatemalan worry dolls glued to it. These can be seen when looking through the eye holes.

This is my favorite mask. I think it is because I connect with the difficult yet rewarding job of trying to make a difference in the lives of children even if it’s just one child. Keeping this in the forefront, not allowing yourself to be sidetracked by bureaucratic paperwork or pressures from vested interests is easier said than done. It is hard work and emotionally draining and although there isn’t always a ‘happily ever after’ ending, it is a very uplifting and hopeful aspect of the work.

Jane’s Journal

“You have a story for everything!” a teacher once commented. I often think of that comment and I guess I have to admit it’s true. I have stories about when I was a child, stories about my children, and stories about other people’s children. I have stories about being a teacher and being a principal.

However, as I wander through educational theories or page through public education documents housed in dusty public archives, I am bothered by my growing discontent. Much of what I read is barren and sterile, without face or feeling. Principals are portrayed as one dimensional, always thoughtful, always responsive, always right.

As I read about the principal-as-leader, I read about caring. But, the heart has no home, no context within which to anchor the theory. I try to picture the super-humans described. They are caring and compassionate, always make the appropriate decision, are firm, fair, and yet stand their ground. Their work is clean and linear and always seems to turn out the way they plan.

As I read, I think about Frankenstein, a monster composed of the parts of others. These composite administrators I read about are just like that. They have a bit of this person and a bit of that and are portrayed as being “perfect.” Their work is tidy while I find mine is much messier. My days and weeks have more ups and downs than theirs seem to. Perhaps because my work is made up of many stories, each day an anthology composes itself. As I reread these stories I am able to
reflect and re-story the event to share with others. Sometimes my stories are re-storied by others and perhaps even shared.

Playing the Game: Phyllis

I'm not into role playing. I would have been much better off in this career if I would have learned that skill. I would have succeeded faster. Instead, I was stubborn. I thought you could get there, get to be a principal, I mean, even if you didn't play. If you weren't one of the 'good old boys.' I learned the hard way that really and truly, someone has to want you there. You know, get to bat for you, 'sponsor' you. I learned that cynical doesn't get you anywhere either. You have to play the game to get where you want to go or else you won't get anywhere in this profession.[15]

Phyllis’ mask posed an interesting challenge for me. I wanted one that could have two faces. Phyllis expressed her frustration with the role-playing and game playing that was so prevalent among some of the more dominant male administrators in her system. This ‘select’ group of administrators seemed to be privy to a set of secret rules that allowed them to move up the ladder faster, get what they wanted from Central Office, teachers or parents, and kept them from reprisals when things went wrong.

Phyllis struggled to figure out all the unwritten ‘rules’ and codes of conduct becoming a principal. She felt she constantly had to watch her own back to avoid the pitfalls if she wanted to be effective and move ahead with any issues or changes she wanted to take on.

I made Phyllis’ mask from papier mâché formed over a balloon. The mask is to be worn like a helmet with eye holes on one side and a painted-on face on the back. The image of two faces, reminded me of the Roman god, Janus, the god of beginnings and endings. I thought about how vulnerable principals feel, and how I learned, through experience, to protect myself in order to survive. These are the skills you aren’t taught in principal school. They come from on-the-job experience and you either survive or do not. Having eyes in the back of your head and a helmet for protection are assets in a profession that has moved towards a more narrow managerialist view. Like Phyllis, I felt the frustration and the fear associated with the struggles to maintain focus on teaching and children.

Jane's Journal

I am the main character, the lead actor, the principal informant. I am the researcher and the researched, the self and other. I have come to realize that I cannot separate my 'self' from my position as principal. I am present in my work as principal and as researcher. I am unable to express the complexity of the role and the person within that role or do justice to the principals whom I have interviewed, in words alone. I see their faces and my face, hear their voices and my voice. I am making multiple meanings through the images I carry with me. As I explore my own thinking and that of others, I come to understand that lived experience expressed through mask making, theatre, poetry, and story can make a valuable contribution to the field of educational administration. Or at least, I hope, disrupt the traditional.
Strange yet seemingly familiar,  
Shape shifters,  
Breathing a life history into be-ing,  
Life forces that proclaim the presence of self and others,  
Images emerging from inside,  
Surprising, startling,  
Blending past experiences, current events, and future dreams.

NOTES
[1] This article is (re)-constructed from my unpublished doctoral dissertation: Women principals and their work: Is there room for the 'girls' in the 'boys' club', University of South Australia, 2003. It contains poetic transcriptions of auto-ethnographical portions of the thesis, along with journal entries, and photos of artistic (re)-presentations of interviews with women elementary principals from my research.

[2] This is a reference to the popular trade book Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus by John Gray, Harper Collins Canada1994.


[5] Bochner, A. (2000) suggests that qualitative and ethnographic researchers consider the word alterative rather than alternative as it signifies a transformation, “a change in form as well as in purpose” (266-267).

[6] The British title their principals as ‘head teachers’ or ‘heads’ and have a chat list called “Talking Heads.”

[7] Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of participants.


[11] This notion of “balancing” is prevalent in popular self-help books—the need to balance ones’ private and professional lives—and may point to discourses at work. For an example of this popular pedagogy, see Biggs & Horgan (2000), Time on, time out: Flexible solutions to keep your life in balance (Allen & Unwin).


[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

REFERENCES


### About the Author

**Jane Baskwill** has been a classroom teacher and elementary principal in Nova Scotia for more than twenty-five years. She is presently Program Coordinator for Graduate Literacy Education on the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax.

Jane is interested in the exploration of multi-model approaches to activist research particularly in the field of educational administration, leadership and change. Her research provides alternative perspectives on leadership as a collective enterprise. She explores research as aesthetic experience through the ways in which meaning is made/shared/contested.

*Principal Arts* is based on her unpublished doctoral thesis *Women Principals and Their Work: Is Their Room for the ‘Girls’ in the ‘Boys’ Club’,* University of South Australia, Adelaide.