

Chapter 1

Introducing a ‘United’ Agenda for Principals



Early in 2011, all public school principals in Queensland, Australia, including myself, were invited to a statewide conference in Brisbane with the conference theme ‘United in our Pursuit of Excellence’. The intention of the two-day conference was to align leadership practices and goals across all schools within the Department of Education and make principals aware of the future direction of education in Queensland. Over 1200 principals received messages directly from system leaders and consulting experts. These messages focused on ensuring we were all on the ‘same page’ with regard to leadership of our schools, including the targeted use of school data to inform school improvement and implementation of the system’s reform agenda *United in our Pursuit of Excellence* (which would be formalised and officially released in June/July of 2011). This was an historic conference for a number of reasons, including the fact that it was the first time in recent memory that all principals were brought together in one location. Instead, we usually met in our local geographical regions and focused on localised issues that were specifically relevant to our needs.

Throughout that two-day conference, I sat in the room with over a thousand colleagues from vastly different contexts and considered the logistics that must have been involved to gather us all in one location. I could not help but wonder to what extent our individual contexts and school needs would be taken into account within this new ‘United’ focus. I realised the significance of the conference in its aim of demonstrating that we were at a turning point regarding the direction in which the system, schools, and school leaders were moving. Speaking with my colleagues at the time, we commented on the sense of urgency we felt coming through in these messages, as well as the focus on leadership. Many of our discussions during and after the conference centred on the notion that things were going to be different for principals and leadership practices, as well as for the Department’s expectations for how we would work. At the same time, it sparked an immediate interest for me in better understanding how this change would impact upon us as leaders and on our schools.

Not only did this conference mark the start of a new era for principals in Queensland, it was also the beginning of this research journey, exploring the ways these new requirements and messages from the system would shape leaders, and leadership practices, in Queensland over the coming years. This journey culminates (as much as research ever 'ends') in this book, where I explore the ways principals' work is changing within a wider, global, climate of 'school improvement' reforms.

To set the scene in a little more detail, this conference and new agenda for schools was a response to the introduction of annual National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing in 2008, where Queensland was perceived to have performed poorly in contrast to other Australian states and territories. *United in our Pursuit of Excellence*, the Queensland state schooling system's improvement agenda, was developed through recommendations resulting from reports commissioned from researchers who were engaged as school improvement consultants (Queensland Department of Education and Training (QDET), 2012a, b). *United in our Pursuit of Excellence* explicitly required principals to act as instructional leaders. According to this agenda, teachers and school leaders were required to use school and system data to guide their goals for school improvement under the notion of an 'unrelenting focus on improved student achievement' (QDET, 2011a, p. 1), which became an explicit priority for all schools upon the release of *United in our Pursuit of Excellence*.

The school improvement movement serves as a global context for these reform stories. The stories and case studies in this book can illuminate the shared challenges—and possibilities—facing principals in a multitude of contexts and locations. The systemic policies and associated discourses that govern principals' work in Queensland schools establish that principals are expected to be working towards school improvement. For example, the Department's 2014–2018 strategic agenda, *Every Student Succeeding*, requires principals to deliver 'extraordinary and sustained improvement and achievement' (QDET, 2014a, p. 1). Not only does the hyperbole of this requirement become nonsensical on further consideration, it also provides an example of the sense of pressure and urgency that can be found within school improvement policy discourses. If all principals delivered 'extraordinary and sustained improvement and achievement', the bar for measuring 'extraordinary' improvement would continue to increase until it became an impossible task. As Ball (2003) highlighted, teachers and school leaders in performative cultures are encouraged to be 'outstanding, successful, above the average' (p. 219), reflective of these goals from the Department's strategic agenda. This study contributes to the field of educational leadership, management, and administration by undertaking an in-depth exploration of the impact of school improvement discourses on the principalship.

It could be suggested that educational leadership is an ever-changing field, so the question might be asked why this research is significant at this point in time—why this research, and why now? Commencing this study at the same time as the Department was introducing these changes meant that at the same time as principals have been enacting significant system-wide reform initiatives, I have been able to examine the way these policies and initiatives impacted upon leaders and leadership practices over the first six years of the changes taking place. In the second half of 2011, *United*

in our Pursuit of Excellence (Queensland Department of Education and Training (QDET), 2011a) was launched and thereafter formed the basis of much of the work being undertaken by and with principals during this period.

Performance management by principals' supervisors was driven by the agenda outlined within the document (Bloxham, Ehrich, & Iyer, 2015), and targeted capability development and support for principals was also drawn from the system's improvement agenda. In addition, the document explicitly highlighted the shift in expectations for principals to become instructional leaders (QDET, 2011b), marking a significant change in leadership expectations. From there, policies from the system explicitly required principals to act as instructional leaders, and to focus on specific aspects of education in a bid towards school improvement. This is an important shift to note because over twenty years ago, Murphy (1994) found that expectations were being added to the role of the principal but little was being removed. Principals have therefore had to find a balance between external and internal demands for their time, and many found that previously vital elements of their role (such as instructional leadership) fell by the wayside as a result. Now, however, Departmental policies explicitly requiring principals to focus on instructional leadership present another challenge for principals' balance of leadership and management.

These policies serve as discourses surrounding and constituting the field of educational leadership, management, and administration. The enactment of these policies—through conversations, supervisory practices, and the unwritten rules of leadership within the system—serve to reinforce policy discourses and create further discourses. Ball (1999, p. 14) vividly illustrated the influence of these reforms on educators, commenting that 'a complex of overlapping, agonistic and antagonistic discourses swarm and seethe around the teacher in this scenario of reform'. Further illustrating the sense of turbulence felt by leaders in a period of rapid reform, Cooley and Shen (2003, p. 10) noted that principals have been 'placed in the eye of the storm' of accountabilities. To frame the way educators respond to these reform scenarios, Ball, Braun, and Maguire (2012) proposed the notion of policy *enactment* rather than policy *implementation*. Inherent in the study of policy enactment is the belief that there is more at a school level than reading and implementing policies. Policy enactment acknowledges that the negotiation that really happens in schools enacting policy is a more 'ambiguous, messy' process (Maguire, Braun, & Ball, 2015, p. 485).

Principals *enacting* policy must understand the policy (the way 'implementation' suggests), but in doing so they *decode* policy, taking into account the complex layers of discourse, context, and resulting myriad of possible interpretations of 'ensembles' (Ball et al., 2012, p. 5) formed of multiple competing or complementary policies. This way of thinking about policy also acknowledges the work that happens in schools in terms of relationship building and negotiating the enactment of policies (Maguire et al., 2015). In this book, I adopt these notions of policy enactment rather than more traditional implementation studies, agreeing with the argument that proper recognition is needed of the 'various cultures, histories, traditions, and communities of practice that exist in schools' (Ball et al., 2012, p. 5). The things that make a school unique must be taken into account when considering the enactment of policy,

as well as the impact of the complex discourses surrounding leadership and school improvement. Hallinger (2003) commented that successful instructional leaders need to adjust their performance to meet the 'needs, opportunities, and constraints imposed by school context' (p. 334). Similarly, Wildy and Clarke (2012) noted the importance of 'contextual literacy' (p. 71), emphasising the need for school leaders to understand the complexities of their contexts, including their school and wider community, when making decisions.

Ball (1993, p. 11) discussed the layers of complexity surrounding policy enactment as 'policy as text' and as 'policy as discourse'. Policy as text focuses on 'official' policies and the way they are encoded and decoded, the intentions with which they were written, and the contexts in which they are understood and enacted. It refers to the way they are not static documents that are simply implemented, but instead are shaped, interpreted, and adjusted to fit the local school's context. Policy as discourse focuses on the wider discourses that influence and constitute the people within the system—in this case, principals in Queensland's state schooling system. Ball et al. (2012) expanded upon these notions of policy as text and policy as discourse and established that policy is 'texts and things' (such as national strategies and legislation—for example, *United in our Pursuit of Excellence*), but emphasised that policies are also discursive practices that constitute and influence the people within the system. They noted that 'policy is done by and done to teachers; they are actors and subjects, subject to and objects of policy' (Ball et al., 2012, p. 3). These policies and discourses construct principals' subjectivities, and their identities, in various ways that result in specific leadership practices and approaches being undertaken in schools.

About the Study: Theoretical Framework

This book shows the myriad ways the principalship has been shaped by a period of urgent and ongoing reform. I argue that the principalship has been significantly influenced by discourses of educational leadership and school improvement within a broader reform policy landscape. In this book, I explore the way principals have had to negotiate this rapidly changing reform landscape while manoeuvring around and within the policies and discourses that continue to influence their work. To do this, I undertook diachronic parallel case studies focusing on three principals, Max, Judy, and Scott, within the wider case study of Queensland's state schooling system over a fieldwork period spanning three school years from 2013 to 2015. I have known these three dedicated educators for many years and was lucky enough to be able to work closely with them while developing the ideas within this book. Although I have used pseudonyms to describe their names and school locations, this was more about research protocols than about their preference to remain anonymous. They were exceptionally generous with their time and thoughts, and I am indebted to them for their willingness to spend a number of years as part of this project. This is especially

important to acknowledge when considering just how much principals' workloads have increased and the sense of pressures that they feel.

To theorise the data within this study, I developed a toolbox approach, suggested by Ball (1993) as an appropriate approach to research policy and its impacts. Given the focus of this book series on the use of theory in educational leadership, it seems appropriate to explain the design of my theoretical framework here to frame the study from the outset. In the pages that follow, I provide a primer on some key concepts being used within this book. I hope I have found a comfortable balance between detail and introducing what may be new concepts to some readers, but I must also acknowledge my own limitations in being able to adequately convey the deep complexities involved with these theories in a relatively brief overview.

I write here from a critical perspective (Anyon, 2009), which means that I understand and acknowledge that participants were constructing and being constructed by discourses as they spoke and that their words were 'the effects of a range of discourses operating within society' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). This is reminiscent of Foucault's (1972, p. 27) discussion of moving beyond a speaker's statements, trying to rediscover the unconscious activity, the 'silent murmuring', and the 'tiny, invisible text' that runs between what is said and what informs that speech. This invisible text and silent murmuring in the shape of discourses are forms of the power relationships and influences that constitute principals in their working lives.

When discussing Foucault's notions of power, Anyon (2009) stated, 'we produce power and are produced by it' (p. 7), indicating the centrality of power in our lives—in this case, in the form of 'prescriptive educational policies' (Anyon, 2009, p. 13) in principals' working lives. As such, in trying to answer the research question of how the principalship has been shaped by a push for 'school improvement', I undertook to better understand the ways principals' responses might have been representative of some of the discourses surrounding educational leadership that were being emphasised within the system at the time.

Anyon (2009) described theory as the element that brings data to life; that without theory, 'data lie rather uselessly on the ground, without breath or heartbeat' (p. 8). As she went on to note, it is not possible to gather data without theory, because theory has, in fact, already informed our research through past reading and experiences.

When conceptualising this study, I spent what felt like a significant amount of time trying to find 'the' theory that best applied to my research, before coming to realise that a single approach or theory would not necessarily be the solution. Indeed, Anyon (2009) warned against making use of a single idea or concept for the sake of it and instead suggested that theories might need to be combined in novel ways. Foucault (1994; see Nietzsche, 2015; Peters & Besley, 2007 for further discussion) posited that his work should be thought of as a toolbox where researchers can use concepts in ways that work for them, rather than feeling bound by a single fixed approach. Drawing upon Foucault's notions, Ball (2006) further suggested that researchers need to be cautious about theories or frameworks that offer a simple solution and encouraged the use of different theories for different aspects of analysis, particularly in relation to the analysis of policy and its effects.

I decided upon the notion of a research toolbox, specifically suggested by Ball (1993) as an appropriate method of researching policy and the impacts of policy, given the scope involved in this field of research. As Ball went on to note, Ozga (1990) also emphasised the need for research in this area to examine the big picture of policy right down to the local level. In the case of this study, I achieve this by initially exploring the overarching policies and discourses that guided principals' work at a global and systemic level, then delving deeper into principals' enactment of policies at a local or individual level. This provides the multi-layered research emphasised by Ball and Ozga and also takes into account Ball's (1993) argument that the effect of policy varies within different contexts. By exploring the impact of policies in three different school contexts, and the way they shaped principals' conceptualisation and enactment of their roles, I can analyse the big-picture effects of policy as well as the localised effects.

In order to do this, I adopted Ball's (2006) notion that theory offers 'a set of possibilities for thinking with' (p. 1), rather than a restrictive framework. He acknowledged that not all theories work effectively together to guide research and that there ought to be some coherence in the theories chosen to guide researchers' thinking and analysis.

In using the toolbox approach of selecting theory or concepts where appropriate for the research aims, I made use of theory at a system level to better understand the cultures, environments, and policy conditions in which principals were working. This macro-level theory works in conjunction with theory at a more-micro (individual)-level, to better understand the impacts of these policy conditions on the participants in this study: Max, Judy, and Scott.

At a macro-level, I theorise the data through notions of performativity and the sociology of numbers, to better understand the way discourses of school improvement and school reform influenced the principalship in government schools in Queensland. At a micro-level, I take a Foucauldian-informed approach and make use of his 'gadgets' (Foucault, 1980) of discourse, discipline, subjectivity, and surveillance to explore the ways these performative cultures, and the sociology of numbers (Porter, 1995) impacted upon participants in the study.

Macro-level: Theories About the System

Performativity

In 1984, Lyotard produced *The Postmodern Condition*, wherein he examined the notion of performativity and made predictions about the way efficiency would trump the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Ball (2003, 2006) drew upon Lyotard's work to discuss the impact of the constant monitoring and measuring of outputs related to the work of educators. Performativity is a means of regulating individuals and systems through the use of judgments and comparisons, as well as measuring their performance and identifying moments of 'quality' (Ball, 2003). This notion of quality

is entrenched in educational leadership discourse (Moore, 2004), and questions must be asked about who defines the targets and benchmarks against which principals are being measured.

In a climate of performativity, complex work undertaken in schools is reduced to quantifiable or measurable data sets, and judgments are made about the quality or worth of the educator based on these data. The importance of measuring, quantifying, and (ostensibly) objectively qualifying the work undertaken by educators links clearly to the other key means of theorising the data within this book which is that of the sociology of numbers, in particular, the trust placed in numbers when assessing the quality of work undertaken in schools. Theories of performativity informed collection of data within this research by providing an initial guide for the development of interview questions.

Previous research had highlighted the presence of performative cultures in the Queensland state schooling system (e.g., see Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Singh, Heimans, & Glasswell, 2014), and Chaps. 2 and 3 of this book detail the complexities that were influencing participants' work in schools. Influences included the proliferation of data; the impact of high-stakes testing; the nature of relationships with principals' supervisors; and the expectation for principals to align with system imperatives and discourses of school improvement. Theories of performativity were also used in the analysis of data, helping to identify relevant themes from the interviews within the key concepts noted above. These same notions have also been used to theorise current research that focuses on similar contexts as this book. For example, analysis of performative cultures and the quantification of education, particularly in Queensland schools in the current climate of education reform, is evident in the literature from Hardy (2013, 2014, 2015), Hardy and Boyle (2011), Keddie, Mills, and Pendergast (2011), Lingard and Sellar (2013) and Niesche (2011), among others. As such, the use of these theories complements the work already being undertaken in these contexts and expands upon notions of principals' enactment of educational reform within this particular policy ensemble.

Sociology of Numbers and the Quantification of Education

The sociology of numbers and the related critical analysis of the way numbers in the form of measurable data are driving the work of principals is an important element of theorising the data presented in this book. Porter (1995) discussed the power given to numbers and the notion of objectivity—a contested notion pertaining to education in particular. Objectivity is implied by the presentation of numbers, facts, and figures in standardised forms that do not take local contexts or complexities into account.

This presents the idea that these numbers are fair and rigorous representations of the work undertaken in schools and indeed may be adopted as a means of making this work measurable or accessible to those with little knowledge of the field, providing licence to make judgments without having expertise to support these judgments. This was echoed by Gorur (2016, p. 33) who commented on the way these data create

informed publics, providing 'previously distant' groups with the means of holding public institutions to account. It leads, in part, to the minimising of complexities and a suggestion that it is possible to provide standardised understandings of large-scale concepts, such as schooling. This theory provides a lens for exploring the issues that can arise with reference to the government's commitment to public and transparent school data. In this book, I highlight the way this focus on narrow measures of data guided the practices of case study participants Max, Judy, and Scott.

Porter drew upon work from Foucault as well as Rose (1990), who suggested that these measures work in a cycle to construct the behaviours they are intended to measure—evidence of Foucault's notion of governmentality at work (Foucault, 1988, 2001, 2007). Porter (1995) commented further that these numbers create norms, which are one of the most effective ways of controlling behaviour from a distance—a concept again elaborated upon further by Niesche (2011). This notion of steering principals' work from a distance can be linked to Lingard and Sellar's (2013) suggestion that Queensland's education system has not changed so much as it has been reconstituted around certain ways of working, many of which are driven by numbers and data. This theory helped to inform the data collection process in the same ways described earlier, by providing a starting point for the development of initial questions, with a particular focus on the proliferation of data in the case study context. Principals were asked about their experiences with the use of data, their understanding of expectations from the system with reference to data, and their personal beliefs relating to the notion of how data influenced their work as school leaders.

Micro-level: Theories About the Individual

The aforementioned theories help to understand policy and its impacts at a system or macro-level, but it is vital also to understand how individual subjects are constituted and impacted by these policies and discourses. To do so, I make use of a number of Michel Foucault's concepts. Foucault himself suggested that his theories could be used as 'gadgets' and should be used in the ways that suit individual researchers and their projects (Foucault, 1980). The use of Foucault's theories in educational leadership research is an established approach and has been suggested as a way of troubling discourses about educational leadership (Gillies, 2013; Niesche, 2015; Niesche & Keddie, 2016). Niesche (2013b, 2016) suggested that although the use of Foucault's theories to analyse leadership is well established, his theories and their relation to educational leadership in the current climate of accountability could benefit from further exploration—an area to which this book contributes.

The use of Foucault's theories helps to drive the structure of this book and also contributes to the development of the research process, and collection and analysis of data. A number of Foucault's theories are used in the toolbox approach described previously, including notions of discourses, governmentality, subjectivity, discipline and surveillance, and technologies of the self. Each of these works together within this study to help understand the way participants' identities, their practices, and

their beliefs were shaped by the system. Much of Foucault's work relates to knowledge and power, and there are direct connections to notions of performativity and the measurement of principals' work outlined earlier, due to the concept of power being used to control, approve or promote certain actions, and reject others (Gillies, 2013). Specific to the focus of this book, it has been suggested that these power relationships and constructs, and the approval or rejection of certain practices or people, serve to form the unwritten rules by which principals are expected to abide (Gillies, 2013). These unwritten rules are often constructed and regulated through dominant discourses.

Discourse

The exploration of the principalship within the current discourses of educational leadership is an appropriate connection with this aspect of Foucault's work. 'Discourse' is a cornerstone of Foucault's work, and in relation to this study, discourses specific to the field of educational leadership (Foucault, 1972) encompass the influences on a principal's formation of their self—the explicit and implicit expectations that influence their world. This notion of competing or complementing discourses in policy and actions is one way of exploring principals' work, in particular the idea of explicit discourse as text or policy, and the more implicit discourse as conversation, which can be formed and expressed through relationships and unspoken rules (Doherty, 2007; Foucault, 1977; Gillies, 2013).

Foucault's notions of discourse can help us to better understand the wider context in which the principalship is constituted. This includes the policies and processes that explicitly impact upon principals' work, as well as the more implicit expectations borne through unspoken expectations and relationships with principals' supervisors, staff, students, and community members. Ball's (1993, p. 11) reference to this as 'policy as text' and 'policy as discourse' provides an understanding of the world in which principals are working, and the elements that are influencing their work as school leaders. Within this study, discourses of school improvement and educational leadership (including accountability, autonomy, and instructional leadership) were used to drive the data collection and analysis process and link very closely to the notion of the subject.

Subjectivity

The concept of subjectivity provides a way of understanding how discourses shape the subject, or an individual's construction of their self (Foucault, 2000). The 'subject' in this case is the individual principal, as well as the principalship as a whole. It is important to note that the subject, or the individual self, is constructed via their interactions with people and systems, and will therefore be different depending on

the situation or circumstance. Weedon (1996) noted that subjectivity is produced in a range of discursive practices, identifying that social relations and the inherent power structures between people will determine the range of forms of subjectivity available to a person. Gillies (2013) specifically discussed the ways that certain discourses work to shape 'good' teachers, which directly influences my exploration of the way policies and discourses shaped participants as school leaders. Ball (2015) noted the way policy as discourse results in the various ways principals (in this case) speak, act, think, and behave. Some of the modes of subjectivation discussed by Gillies (2013) concerning educators included explicit policy as text in the form of teacher standards (and, I would add, systemic policy requirements) as well as the more implicit policy as discourse in the form of parental, student, and societal expectations.

It is vital to note that there is no one 'true' self or subject. Due to complex power relations and shifting expectations for principals, their subjectivities vary in different circumstances and at different times. In this book, I explore the ways this was evident over a three-year period through multiple shifting expectations of principals via policy as text and policy as discourse through expectations from the system, students, staff, and communities, as well as those from the principals themselves.

Discipline, Surveillance, and Governmentality

Discipline, surveillance, and governmentality are all inherently complex concepts in their own rights, and by working them together here I do not intend to imply that they are easily aligned. Instead, they are used in tandem within this book to better understand the way principals' subjectivities were shaped by dominant discourses surrounding educational leadership. In this book, I use Foucault's notion of 'discipline' to better understand the ways individual principals, as well as principals as a wider group, are managed and constructed by the wider system (Foucault, 1977). This is complemented by his concepts of 'surveillance' (Foucault, 2003) in reference to the ways principals are monitored and judged. One example of a tool of surveillance is the proliferation of data ostensibly being used to measure quality and effectiveness in schools—and, by extension, school leaders—at this time.

Foucault's (1988, 2001, 2007) notions of 'governmentality' are also useful ways to understand what he calls the 'conduct of conduct' (see Doherty, 2007; Niesche, 2013b), or the methods and procedures that control and guide principals' conduct in the course of their work. This is further complemented by Foucault's (1988) theories of technologies of the self, wherein he explores the practices individuals undertake to shape themselves in particular ways in response to discourses. This might be acts of compliance or resistance, and Niesche (2013b), in particular, has explored notions of subjectivity and counter-conduct in educational leadership. The notion of technologies of the self is linked closely to Foucault's (1977) notion of discipline.

Whereas discipline is often about power being exercised over a subject, technologies of the self are about a subject governing themselves. As suggested by Gillies (2013), the ultimate aim in a modern neoliberal society, such as that in which the

principals in this study work, is for self-governing individuals who embody the ideals of the system. This book explores the way principals in these case studies have become self-governing and identifies the way some of their initial, critical attitudes towards initiatives such as NAPLAN have completely reversed to now align with the system's imperatives.

Gillies (2013) commented that subjectivation—the construction of principals' identities and enactment of their roles—can be achieved through discipline and technologies of the self, either separately or when combined. I suggest that surveillance and governmentality play an important role here as well. All of these aspects of monitoring and shaping individuals and groups work together to form powerful norms and expectations that provide clear expectations for principals' behaviour (Porter, 1995). Combined with macro-theories of performativity and the sociology of numbers, these theories enable a deeper understanding of the disciplining of the principals in this study. Through the introduction of policies and related discourses, these principals were being disciplined to work in certain ways to meet the Department's expectations, created through these policies and discourses.

The use of Foucauldian theory within this book aligns closely with Niesche's work (2011, 2013a, b, 2015) and his use of notions of discipline, surveillance, governmentality, and subjectivation in his explorations of the principalship in similar contexts, in the current climate of urgent reform. These same key notions were used by Gillies (2013) and Niesche and Keddie (2016) to better understand the construction of principals' identities, a focus which has clear links to this book and advances the use of these theories within the field of educational leadership studies. The use of poststructuralist ideas, including Foucault's theories, to investigate educational leadership has been described as a way of opening up the space of educational leadership and administration for further investigation (Eacott & Evers, 2015).

Within these case studies, I explored the context of public education in Queensland, identifying the key discourses influencing principals' work. I analysed the ways these discourses influenced principals' subjectivities, not only as individual principals but also the principalship as a 'collective'. I found commonalities as well as contradictions in the ways these subjectivities constructed individual principals in response, as part of a process of rearticulating dominant discourses about educational leadership. I am interested in the ways some of these responses aligned across participants, and I offer possible explanations of the times principals' responses diverged.

I focused on primary school principals in government schools, all of whom shared an ostensibly 'common' wider policy and discursive context, and shared experiences of working in primary schools. Thus, the impact of this context could be better understood, rather than introducing further complexities and factors that might have altered the shared context such as those faced by secondary principals, or school leaders in the non-government schooling sector. In addition, it must be acknowledged that I did not set out to critique the current educational climate by asking whether these reforms are necessary or effective, or by exploring the impact of these reforms on students [for examples of studies that do this, see Bousfield (2014) and Freeman (2013)]. Instead, I sought to better understand the impact of these reform policies and initiatives on the principals within these case studies.

About the Study: Research Design

Foucault (1972) discussed the importance of identifying the individual who is speaking because the positions they occupy can be representative of the institutions from which they speak. When I began this study, I was working as a principal in a public primary school and then moved into a new Departmental role at a more senior level, coaching and mentoring principals in their 'school improvement journeys', so I was fully immersed in the practices and approaches that I was going to be researching.¹ After some time in those roles, I took up a position as an academic at a university, which then shifted my work focus into the area of teacher education and educational leadership. Fox and Allan (2014) noted that when doing social research, our selves—in this case, my experiences as a principal working within the state schooling system—are 'inextricably involved' (p. 102) and these experiences inform our interpretation of events.

Writing about her research in a different field, Taylor (2011) discussed the notion of friendship and relationships in insider research and made a final comment that particularly resonated with me regarding how I approached this aspect of my research. She noted:

As researchers, we have no handbook or manual to follow, no precise way of orchestrating such engagements to ensure a mutually beneficial outcome. To guide us in our research, we must equally value and rely upon our strength of character, goodwill, our gut instincts and emotional intelligence as we do our formal training. (Taylor, 2011, p. 19)

This conclusion helped to guide my reflections throughout the research process and emphasised the importance of professional judgment when working in pre-existing relationships. This professional judgment ensured that I reflected upon what might be appropriate topics for discussion with my participants, ensuring not to bring in potentially problematic information that I may have been made aware of through my prior relationships with these colleagues or our mutual acquaintances.

My own changes in employment also posed an interesting dilemma as a researcher; in particular, I began to focus on the shift from traditional notions of insider researcher to outsider researcher and the rapidity with which systemic expectations and priorities changed. As I progressed through writing this book, I became familiar with the body of research that moves beyond the insider/outsider researcher binary and found myself connecting with Thompson and Gunter's (2011) theorising of Bauman's notion of liquid identities. Researcher identity and experiences are messy, complex, and not easily categorised, particularly for those of us early in our research journeys and still finding our feet. With that said, some aspects of the traditional insider/outsider binary did feel more relevant to my situation at the time. For example, I quickly discovered how much more challenging it could be to research from outside the system without automatically having access to information about the new

¹This term was a colloquialism used consistently by participants and forms part of the vernacular surrounding school improvement within the Department. It is evident in some documents from the Department including the 2015 School Performance Assessment Framework (QDET, 2015b). I elected to adopt this phrase to maintain consistency within my analysis of interview data.

systemic priorities, documents disseminated to all employees, or even the proverbial Departmental grapevine to alert me to when new changes were going to be introduced. I was often offered access to non-public documents intended only for employees by well-meaning former colleagues but declined because of ethical concerns.

The most significant benefit of my more-insider-researcher status was highlighted as a benefit of insider-researcher conducting case studies; an ‘established intimacy which promotes both the telling and the judging of truth’ (Unluer, 2012, p. 1). In transcribing and analysing my interview data, this trust was evident through jokes, ‘off the record’ comments, and the intimacy identifiable through unspoken communication and the shared understanding described above. This, coupled with my own knowledge of and experiences with the Department, led to a richness of the data that may not have otherwise been as easily achievable. Finally, I am cognisant about and respectful of, the trust participants placed in me as someone who was known to them, in addition to my ethical responsibilities as a researcher, and I have endeavoured to ensure that their comments and insights are represented fairly and accurately.

Methodology

Long-term case studies of three principals (Max, Judy, and Scott) were chosen as the methodology in order to obtain a rich picture about the subject, allowing for a range of methods of data collection during the fieldwork stage. The fieldwork period spanning three school years allowed for a more in-depth analysis of principals’ experiences during the introduction of these policies, rather than a single point in time snapshot. This was vital due to the phenomenon of short-term successes, followed by the likelihood of an implementation dip where results will fall again, as has been discussed by Pendergast et al. (2005). A single point in time study could provide skewed data, given that it may be taken during the initial success period, the implementation dip, or after the school has recovered from the dip. The long-term approach to the case studies enabled me to see the evolution of participants’ ideas and approaches. For example, during the time I spent with Scott, I was able to observe some of his approaches develop from initial big-picture ideas into the formulation of specific approaches, to finally being implemented and then reflected upon and refined or rejected.

The parallel diachronic case studies during which I followed the evolution of the principalship, participants’ roles, and the school’s improvement journey over a period of three school years, were undertaken via regular school visits and in-depth interviews. These visits were undertaken approximately every six months, allowing time for progression of ideas and approaches to be implemented and reflected upon by participants between interviews. The length of studies enabled me to observe the disciplining of the principalship over time, as participants’ practices and viewpoints adjusted to meet system norms and expectations.

Observations

During the research design process for data collection, I elected to include the option for observation where it might have been relevant or provided further insights into the cases, such as at staff meetings or similar meetings. Researching principals' perspectives, my key focus was thus on the principals themselves, so I did not seek to observe anything unless the principal invited me because they felt it would complement our conversations. This eventuated organically only twice, with Max and Judy, enabling me to see their interactions with staff at staff meetings and further understand some of the approaches we had been discussing in interviews about working with data, as well as school-wide planning and communication processes. In the end, observations were a minor aspect of the data collection for this book, but they did serve to inform some further questions or points of discussion during interviews.

Document Interrogation

A recurring element in the discussion of current pressures on each of the principals was the increase in planning and documentation required. Throughout the case studies, I consulted documents that were publicly available on each school's website such as annual reporting and school strategic planning information, or documents provided by the participants themselves. Document interrogation (or analysis) involves finding, selecting, appraising, and synthesising data found within documents (Rapley, 2007). Through analysing these planning and reporting documents, I was able to gather information such as school priorities and data trends. Like the observations detailed above, this method of data collection was used primarily to inform interviews.

Interviews

Semi-structured individual interviews were undertaken with each of the participants, or as Alvesson (2011) described them, 'loosely structured' interviews. In these interviews, some initial questions were prepared, but the interviews were flexible and able to follow departures from the initial topic. The loosely structured interviews were scheduled at various points throughout the case study, with all three key participants being asked some of the same questions to determine any commonalities. The data collection and analysis process was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) theoretically informed thematic analysis process, reflective of Anyon's (2009) emphasis on the importance of theory when working with data. Within this approach, engagement with theory and the literature prior to data collection helped to determine the initial structured questions.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews then enabled the conversation to shift to other areas when the opportunity arose. The initial shared, semi-structured questions were developed as part of the initial research design and were heavily informed by the literature. As such, some of these questions were discarded when interviews began, because it became evident that they did not apply to the participants' contexts or experiences. Initial questions took the form of questions designed to better understand the demographics and dynamics of each school, and questions developed with an aim towards finding out more about each participant's professional journey. Other questions, informed by the literature, focused on school improvement, school culture, and some of the key discourses that had arisen within the literature such as instructional leadership, data, accountability, and autonomy. Unstructured interview questions then arose from any points of interest noted during previous interviews, observations, and document analysis. Field notes from document interrogations also provided a guide for further loosely structured interview questions that arose. Each interview with the principals lasted between sixty and ninety minutes, and interviews were conducted at approximately six-month intervals which enabled me to work with participants over a long period and see the disciplining of the principalship over time, as well as through changing contexts such as changes in government and changes in the system's leadership. Two additional interviews were undertaken with Richard and Tracy, both of which lasted approximately two hours, and provided further perspectives on some of the insights gained from interviews with Max, Judy, and Scott.

Bourdieu (1996) discussed the importance of non-violent interactions pertaining to undertaking interviews, describing them as a social exchange. He emphasised the importance of active and methodical listening and minimising the imposition of a traditional question-and-answer interview. He also discussed the impact of working with people personally known to the interviewer, and the way verbal and non-verbal interactions could be undertaken more effectively due to these pre-existing relationships. In addition, due to my pre-existing relationships with each of the participants, as noted earlier in this chapter, I was fortunate that these interviews were all very easy to secure and that participants were supportive of the work I was trying to do. I understand that the process of engaging with participants is not always as straightforward and, as Bourdieu (1996) noted, these difficulties can be imposing upon the interviewee. I acknowledge that I may have gathered richer data due to these long-standing relationships than had I been interviewing strangers and spending valuable time developing trust and establishing relationships. Although this factor enabled me to take advantage of my chosen research methods, it did raise a number of considerations that had to be incorporated in the research design in terms of presenting and analysing the data and working with participants.

Data Analysis

I undertook a theoretically informed thematic analysis of the data, which meant that the literature and theorising on performativity, accountability, and the principalship informed the initial identification of themes relating to key discourses about educational leadership. As Braun and Clarke (2006) noted, this means that the development of themes involves interpretation and, being driven by theory, the resulting analysis is 'not just description, but is already theorised' (p. 84). The theoretically informed thematic analysis approach used relevant theorising and the literature to inform the development of interview questions, as well as the analysis of data. Aligning with Braun and Clarke's (2006) description of thematic analysis, the processes for thematic analysis within this study draws upon a constructionist position, critically analysing the way participants' realities and perceptions reflect wider discourses within the society or system being examined.

To analyse the data, I followed the phases of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87). This involved familiarising myself with the data and constructing an orthographic transcript, which included verbal and non-verbal utterances such as laughter, pauses, and gestures (such as shrugging or shaking or nodding of heads). I then generated codes and identified themes, relating to repeated patterns (such as discussion of school data, school improvement, or school context) pertaining to the broad conceptual resources of performativity, sociology of numbers, and discourses relating to leadership and school improvement that informed the research. Individual extracts of data were coded multiple times where relevant. In the next phase, key themes were manually coded for identification within each participant's transcripts, and then across each of the participants where commonalities were identified, using visual representations via colour-coded tabulation. This thematic analysis further guided my approach to discussing the data within this book by highlighting participants' responses to key discourses. Common themes and approaches shared by participants were easily contrasted with their differing viewpoints and thoughts about their core business, or their conceptualisations of the principalship. The semi-structured nature of the interviews further enabled this approach, with each of the participants being asked a selection of questions to elicit various perspectives on key themes including the pressures they saw as influencing the principalship, and the ways schools were working with school data. In phases four and five, a thematic map was created manually to collate the data across participants and themes, and to provide a clear picture of the shared and recurring themes, as well as where themes may have been related to only a smaller subset of participants.

The loosely structured elements of the interviews and the resulting analysis of related data work to bookend the exploration of each participant's compelling stories of working in accountability-heavy environments, and how that influenced their enactment of the principalship. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are constructed to represent some of the key discourses relating to the principalship and explore participants' responses and discussion about these discourses and constructs of the principalship. These chapters serve to theorise notions of performativity and the quantification of

education, as well as principals' subjectivities and the disciplining of the principalship. Together, the chapters present a big picture of the work participants were undertaking in schools and the way these policy ensembles and discourses influenced the principalship.

Contributions to the Field of Educational Leadership

We do not yet know enough about the impact of these ongoing policy changes and discourses on principals' subjectivities, and this book contributes towards these understandings. A brief overview of the call for research in this area is provided here and elaborated upon further in Chaps. 2 and 3. Some time ago now, Harris (2001) highlighted the need for a greater understanding of the role of the principal in a climate where school improvement is emphasised so heavily. School improvement, as a key imperative within the Queensland state schooling system, was an explicit expectation of focus for principals in this study. More recently, Hardy (2014) suggested that little research has been undertaken into the nature of how teachers and principals make sense of their work and learning in these conditions. Hardy (2015) also found that more research was needed to further explore the challenges inherent within balancing an educative disposition with performative logics. Further, Moore (2004) illustrated the divergence of reform discourses positioning 'good' teaching (aligned with performativity and 'delivery' of curriculum) at odds with many educators' personal preferences of holistic education.

In relation to the use of theory, Niesche (2013b) commented that Foucault's ideas (which inform the analysis of data in this research) have been used to understand school leadership, but that leadership practices under current forms of accountability are yet to be explored in depth. In addition, Thompson (2016, p. 58) highlighted a call for research that monitors 'the effects of testing, both intended and unintended'. The study provides a contribution to this area of the field by exploring how the principalship has been impacted by the introduction of NAPLAN testing and the range of associated policies resulting from the introduction of the testing programme.

The specific focus on the principalship, rather than also encompassing teacher leaders, deputies, or other school leaders, stemmed initially from my work as a principal and later as a Departmental leadership coach for principals. I first experienced the introduction of these changes myself and then saw the impact of these initiatives while I coached principals working towards the school improvement that the Department required. Harris (2012) discussed the influence of these environments on principals when she noted that at a school level, all change flows through the principal's office. A breadth of research in the literature establishes the impact of reform initiatives on principals, identifying the work principals must undertake in a quest towards the improvement sought by the system (Finnigan, 2010; Fullan, 2007; Hopkins, 2013; Minarechová, 2012; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010).

As more changes are implemented across education systems, so too the role of the principal is evolving to meet these new needs (Brown, 2005; Sahid, 2004; Stronge,

Richard, & Catano, 2008). Stronge et al. (2008) suggested that while researchers can identify the major elements of principals' work, we do not know a great deal yet about how these elements get carried out in practice. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) also identified some time ago that research is needed urgently into how successful instructional leaders create the conditions in their schools which promote student learning. This book does not serve as a victory narrative or 'how to' guide by providing these answers, but this call for further research is important to note, given that a key task of the principal in Queensland schools is defined in their role description as being to improve outcomes for students (QDET, 2014b). This also means that more research is needed about the pressure on principals to deliver upon this requirement for school improvement; this is a gap to which this book contributes by exploring one system in depth over a period of time, identifying the changes in expectations for principals under policy conditions that explicitly required principals to 'deliver school performance' and improvement (QDET, 2015a, para. 4).

In exploring how the principalship has been shaped in response to the policies and discourses surrounding educational leadership, this study seeks to better understand participants' conceptualisations of their role in a climate of sustained rapid reforms. Little research has been undertaken in the specific area of understandings of the principalship in the current climate of global education reform, as expressed in the Australian context. McGinley (2008) focused on conceptualisations of the role as seen by aspiring principals in the USA. The study included a particular emphasis on the principal preparation programmes that are not currently requirements in Australia but are available in some states as Departmental initiatives. Another American study by Browne-Ferrigno (2003) focused on conceptualisations of the principalship by aspiring principals. However, Max, Judy, and Scott, the participants in these case studies, were very much established in the role, being in the mid- and later phases of their careers. Further studies by Nix (2001) and Qian San (2011) both focused on assistant principals' conceptualisation of their roles, providing some interesting commentary around the history of the role of the principal, while still leaving a gap in the field's understanding of principals' own conceptualisations of their work under current policy conditions.

In this book, then, I extend upon our current understandings by exploring how these more experienced principals conceptualise their roles and enact policy during a particularly tumultuous period in which improvement has been so heavily equated with numbers, particularly in the form of national test results.

Structure of Forthcoming Chapters

Chapter 2 situates the book within a wider, global, push for school improvement. I explore global influences on educational leadership and education policies, and discourses of school improvement. Chapter 3 then delves more deeply into the context for this study. In particular, it focuses on the literature relating to three of the

key discourses influencing the principalship: constructs of autonomy, instructional leadership, and accountability.

With the context for the study established, Chap. 4 introduces the participants and their specific research contexts. In Chap. 5, I illustrate how the principalship is being shaped by a complex ensemble of school improvement policies and discourses by highlighting the sense of pressure felt by Max, Judy, and Scott when working in environments where principals were expected to be agile in responding quickly to systemic requirements and initiatives. The chapter examines the impact of school improvement discourses and policies, and explicit expectations of certain types of leadership approaches desired by the system, including leading with a focus on school data as a driver for improvement. By exploring the context in which participants were working, I build upon current research relating to expectations for principals in systems focused on reform. I highlight pressures revealed by participants as influencing the principalship, with a particular focus on the way they saw the role as having changed over time.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore the way particular aspects of school improvement policies and discourses have influenced the principalship. Chapter 6 investigates the way participants maintained focus on what mattered to them, while manoeuvring within and around these policy ensembles and discourses. While the Departmental agenda required principals to focus on school improvement, each participant negotiated the balance of this with their own beliefs about what matters in schooling. Alignment could be seen in their overarching goal of school improvement and adoption of mandated practices (such as the use of data to drive this agenda), but the balance between this and their personal beliefs about schooling in relation to students' learning meant their practices and philosophies differed considerably at times.

Chapter 7 explores the way participants were shaped by one of the key constructs within the principalship at this time—an expectation for principals to be data-literate and data-focused in their efforts towards improvement. Using the requirement to focus on data in the pursuit of school improvement, this chapter identifies the complex influences of the overwhelming availability of school performance data and explores the way participants responded to these data—either by complying with more performative uses of data, or by exercising counter-conduct and adopting more educative approaches. The chapter identifies the way principals positioned themselves and their schools among these discourses of data, quality, and school improvement. Chapter 8 then draws final conclusions and reflects upon the research project. I conclude by exploring the implications of this research for school leaders, researchers, and policymakers.

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