Chapter 2
School Improvement Discourses: Autonomy, 'Instructional' Leadership, and Accountability

The spread of the school improvement movement can be traced via Sahlberg's (2011) notions of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) and is evident in policies that seem eerily similar, though in vastly different contexts. These global reform movements can be seen in the initiatives we readily recognise, and one can see connections between them without having to delve too deeply—America's *No Child Left Behind*, and its more recent *Race to the Top* contained themes of standardisation of curriculum, high-stakes testing, and discourses of teacher quality, and reflect Australia's government's focus in their 2008 Education Revolution and subsequent policies. Similarly, England's Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) is known for its school inspections, once touting the notion of 'Improvement through Inspection' (Courtney, 2013). Research has shown mixed evidence about the effectiveness of the OFSTED inspection regime (Plowright, 2007) including potentially negative effects on educators (Case, Case, & Catling, 2000; Fielding, 2001; Jeffrey & Woods, 1996) and possibly even school outcomes in some cases (Rosenthal, 2004). It holds parallels with the American interest in classroom inspections and ranking and evaluation of teachers, and it is being taken up with vigour by the Australian state of New South Wales where the then Education Minister Adrian Piccoli launched the Education Standards Authority which would conduct random and unannounced audits, and suggested that its powers to close schools 'ought to make schools […] and teachers nervous around teaching standards', though in the same statement, the Education Minister went on to suggest that the process was not intended to be punitive (Munro, 2016).

Across many of these countries, we can also see the siren song discourse positioning Finland as a point of comparison and a system to strive for, with politicians and the media referring to Finland's schooling system as one to emulate. While initially this was about repeating their chart-topping success on PISA rankings, discussions in recent years have shifted more to their focus on well-being and student engagement. Countries eschewing the GERM movement influences are increasing, with Thrupp (2017) discussing the (very long) journey that took place in New Zealand and their relentless fight against reductive standards and emphasis on measurement of students

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and teachers, culminating in eventual success with an incoming government removing these measures. The country's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, posted a video on her Facebook page announcing the change and stating that the standards [and associated measurement and ranking] were 'a distraction' and that teachers could now 'go back to teaching and doing the things that [they] do best'.

The intent of this chapter is to ground this book in a wider, global, context of school improvement reforms. While local context is a central aspect of policy enactment, principals' responses to these shared policy conditions can be considered as part of the wider reform and school improvement environment and campaign. To examine the school improvement movement, I have structured this chapter as an exploration of the key discourses associated with these policies. I begin by providing a background to the global climate of school improvement reforms and then shift into an exploration of key discourses influencing the work of leaders under these policy conditions. Recurring discourses include greater school autonomy alongside the explicit expectation of certain leadership practices in the pursuit of school improvement, accompanied by an increase in external accountabilities, all of which work to steer principals' conduct from a distance by emphasising or even requiring certain behaviours. These discourses were evident within the literature and later in the data gathered within this project. This chapter will review the literature relating to these discourses which, alongside the systemic and contextual demands discussed in the next chapter, provide an insight into the expectations and constraints that governed the work of leaders in this study.

The Influence of Global Education Reforms on Australian Policy

Leading research in this area (Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Sellar & Lingard, 2013) has highlighted the globalisation of education policy. It has explored the intricately linked facets of education policy under neoliberal policies that emphasise the use of data to make judgments about success, the urgency of reforms, and the borrowing of policy from other nations which results in policies that span nations or, at the least, are very similar between different nations, rather than policies that are 'owned' by the country in question and therefore may be more tailored to their specific needs. This research has highlighted the increasing role played in globalised education policy since the 1990s by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). The current demands of data-driven policies align closely with the OECD's international testing regime, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). First implemented in 2000, the triennial test measures fifteen-year-old students' achievement in reading, mathematics, and science and result in a ranking of participating nations, with 72 nations participating in the 2015 round of testing (OECD, 2016) with over half a million students

taking the test. The scope of the test will also be expanded from 2018, with a view to testing a wider range of skills within students (Lewis & Lingard, 2015).

Researchers (Lingard, Martino, Rezai-Rashti, & Sellar, 2016; Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Sellar, Thompson, & Rutkowski, 2017) have emphasised the cycle of policy influence that the OECD holds globally, partly as a result of PISA. They have argued that the OECD's work is influenced by current understandings of education that are, in turn, shaped by the work that the OECD is undertaking globally. These understandings and this work, as well as the data gathered through the PISA testing program, influence policy-makers as they seek to emulate the results, policies, and work being undertaken regarding education in high-ranking countries. However, as will be seen in the following exploration of global reforms, many of the most commonly adopted policies including standardised high-stakes testing and heavy external accountabilities diverge significantly from successful approaches like those found within high-ranking nations such as Finland, which is frequently described somewhat uncritically in the media and professional literature as an effective schooling system. Policy-makers have looked towards their approaches as possible solutions to their own rankings within PISA (Chung, 2010). Thomson, Gunter, and Blackmore (2013) highlighted the incorporation of policy prescriptions by countries across the globe, based on what is seen as 'best practice' from countries like Finland due to their success in PISA testing. With that said, the release of 2015s PISA results in December 2016 challenged Finland's primacy in world rankings and reinforced the dominance of comparison of school systems, an ongoing trend to which those systems that are deemed to be successful and less successful continue to be subjected. In an interview, Pasi Sahlberg indicated that Finland's ranking in the results was not surprising and that no education reforms would be triggered by the results. Further, he reinforced the importance of taking a wider view of schooling systems than that afforded by measurable data alone (Heim, 2016).

Given the immense amount of work undertake in this area by educational researchers and experts around the world, a significant body of research focuses on systems and schools that have successfully implemented reform initiatives, or specific programs or approaches that were deemed to be successful (for some, see Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003; Copland, 2003; Heck & Hallinger, 2010; O'Day, 2002). As such, within the scope of this book, it is necessary to focus more specifically on the reform agenda that governs the case studies within this book. To contextualise the study more effectively, I will draw explicit links to the Queensland context where relevant throughout the remainder of this chapter.

To further understand different perspectives of current global school improvement reforms, I reviewed academic and professional education literature, including accounts about large-scale school reform from a range of countries (see for example Lee & Park, 2014; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006), critiques of current policy practices (Ravitch, 2010), and accounts of the enactment of these policy practices such as the biography of former Chancellor of Schools in Washington DC, Michelle Rhee (Whitmire, 2011) which explores the sweeping reforms she implemented with the intention of effecting urgent improvement, the success of which remains contested by researchers (for discussion see Peterson, 2011; Ravitch, 2010). This literature, a

range of genres aimed at different audiences, encompassed similar themes, including the current global culture of school reform, the urgency of these reforms, and the importance of leadership at all levels.

Fullan (2007) described his work across many countries that are all working towards school reform, praising the efforts of school systems, school leaders, and staff who are trying to change their education systems in positive ways. He emphasised that a global approach based on research from around the world will provide practitioners and change agents with clear pathways forward. This was in direct contrast to Sahlberg's (2011) observation that over the past two decades education reforms have been demonstrating what he called Einstein's definition of madness, doing the same thing again and again while hoping for different results. Sahlberg's opinion was that these same ineffective reform strategies are being implemented across many nations, each time with greater determination from education system leaders and politicians.

It would be difficult to argue with Sahlberg's assertion, given that Australia is contemplating the implementation of performance pay and has endorsed standardised testing and league tables and emphasises public professional accountability through the release of testing results and similar data (Preiss, 2012). All of these methods have proven ineffective in raising student performance and engagement during their implementation in other countries, yet Australia's state and federal governments are following the trend with similar strategies and hoping for a different result. This sentiment was echoed by Lingard (2011) who noted that Australia is going down a pathway of schooling reform from which other countries seem to be removing themselves.

Much of the literature includes discussion of the importance of centring student equity as a focus in global reform efforts. Recurring themes in the literature on how to make this happen globally include the importance of teacher quality, quality curriculum innovations, and a focus on social justice and equity in education (Costante, 2010; Keddie & Lingard, 2015; Mills et al., 2014; Wilkins, 2015). Discourses of 'quality' that have arisen here can be linked to performative cultures (Ball, 2003, 2006) wherein the work of teachers is measured according to outputs and the discourse is often shaped around snapshots or moments of 'quality'. Mockler (2013) noted that these discussions of *teacher* quality rather than *teaching* quality are a means of focusing on outputs by measuring and judging teachers' work, and blaming teachers when students' results 'fail to measure up' (p. 37). Maguire, Hoskins, Ball, and Braun (2011) maintained that within discourses of 'good' schools, students, teachers, (and principals), those who meet the description of quality are those who achieve well on defined metrics. These notions of performativity provide much of the grounding for theorising the data presented in this book. Of particular, importance in understanding Max, Judy, and Scott's working context is developing an understanding of the literature relating to the complex work being undertaken by principals, and how 'quality' is emphasised and measured under contemporary policy and discursive conditions.

Part of the complexity of the principalship since the introduction of these new policy ensembles in Queensland stems from the lack of clarity surrounding what is

expected of and from principals. The evolving nature of the role itself adds to this complexity and has been addressed over many years by researchers seeking to better understand how the principalship is constituted and what it entails (see Degenhardt & Duignan, 2010; Murphy, 1994; Rousmaniere, 2013; Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008; Thomson, 2011; Thomson & Blackmore, 2006). Leithwood described the principal's role as shifting from administration or management of a school, towards being directly responsible for student achievement. He suggested that this involved making fewer assumptions that what is happening in classrooms is all good work, and focusing specifically on what is or is not helping students achieve success (Costante, 2010).

The changing nature of the principalship has been mapped in international scholarship. Research has documented the evolution of the principalship in schools, although Mulford, Cranston, and Ehrich (2009) suggested that there have been limited opportunities for researchers to learn more about school leadership in the past, which has resulted in research about school leadership that is point-in-time, rather than longitudinal.

A more concentrated reform effort across Australia from the 1980s onwards (Caldwell, 1992; Starr, 2009; Whitaker, 2003) provided scope for more detailed research to be undertaken into the role of the principal. Since the 1980s, the principalship has seen increased demands from a systemic level, heavier focus on policies and accountability, and more specific guidance or directives from district or regional offices (Brown, 2005; Rousmaniere, 2013). Leaders have navigated changing expectations in the principalship, shifting from a bureaucratic model of school leadership to the consultative, community-focused leadership of the late 1970s (Jones, 1987). In Australia, reform movements in the 1980s focused on the value of school-based management, with schools still having to adhere to centralised policies and procedures but being given more control at a local level about the allocation of resources and administrative decisions (Whitaker, 2003). School-based management and autonomy in the principalship was an emerging theme in Australia from the 1980s onwards, with increasing influence throughout the 1990s (Lingard, Mills, & Hayes, 2000) but, arguably, in Queensland it reached something of an apotheosis in 2012 with the introduction of Independent Public Schools, an initiative which offered more formalised autonomy for public school principals. Shifting towards the current era of the principalship, key discourses that have arisen in the 2000s and beyond have resulted in complexities within the principalship, particularly in relation to the tensions accompanying higher levels of accountability and autonomy.

It was identified in the 1990s that expectations were being added to the role of the principal but little was being removed (Murphy, 1994). Since this time, principals have had to find a balance between external and internal demands for their time, with many stating that previously vital elements of their role such as instructional leadership had fallen by the wayside as a result (Murphy, 1994). In the light of these findings that instructional leadership fell by the wayside in the face of ongoing reforms, it is interesting to note that a particularly influential discourse shaping the principalship in the case study context of Queensland was that of instructional

leadership; evident through explicit expectations from the Department that principals would work first and foremost as instructional leaders.

At the same time as principals are expected to be instructional leaders in ways the Department requires, and alongside these discourses of autonomy, are multiple forms of increased external accountabilities. There are tensions in the explicit expectations that principals will work in certain ways, particularly when considered alongside discourses and policies emphasising principals' autonomy to work in ways needed for local contexts.

Discourses of Autonomy for Principals and Schools

Autonomy for principals and schools features heavily in reform efforts around the globe and is a key discourse shaping the principalship in the current climate. There are clear links between this discourse of autonomy and notions of school-based management previously discussed, but the discourses currently influencing the principalship often explicitly refer to the concept as autonomy.

Researchers have worked to define autonomy and detail what it means for schools, school communities, and for the work of principals. These definitions have included principals and schools having more power to make decisions in consultation with their local communities, recruitment, and management of staffing processes, and having more flexibility regarding allocating resources and budgets (Gobby, 2013; Gray et al., 2013). Lingard, Hayes, and Mills (2002) noted that the definition of autonomy is not static and actually changes according to current political, social, and cultural practices and discourses. Therefore, the concept of principal autonomy is heavily influenced by both the local context and the broader educational context, so the specific context in which Max, Judy, and Scott were working positions the study within the wider discursive context.

Eacott (2015, p. 415) noted the widespread adoption of reforms associated with autonomy in almost all western education systems since at least the 1960s. Indeed, Queensland, like many other Australian school systems, has been moving towards greater autonomy for principals since the early 1970s with the commission of the Karmel Report in 1973 by the federal government. The literature notes that the Karmel Report called for schools to be able to meet local contextual needs and have greater powers to allocate resources and make decisions in collaboration with their school communities (Apelt & Lingard, 1993; Caldwell, 2008; Lingard et al., 2002). The aim of these proposed changes included providing more funding to schools to support them in improving student academic outcomes as well as promoting social justice, and Lingard et al. (2002) noted that this was a high point for funding in Australian education, with schools being asked to do more with comparatively less funding in the years since then.

Over the years since 1973, changes in government have also signalled changes in education policy, reflecting the idea that the political and cultural discourse of the time shapes the meaning of autonomy for schools and principals. With the introduc-

tion of a conservative federal government in the mid-1970s, a shift in paradigm saw neoliberal approaches influencing the concept of autonomy in schools. Whereas the initial Karmel report in 1973 included a focus on equity and social justice, the new phase of school leadership aligned more clearly with the New public management concepts from the UK, wherein private sector management strategies heavily influenced leadership roles in the public sector. As a result, principals required a more corporate, managerial style of leadership.

In Australia, reform movements in the 1980s focused on the value of school-based management, with schools still having to adhere to centralised policies and procedures but being given more control at a local level about the allocation of resources and administrative decisions (Whitaker, 2003). Lingard et al. (2002) worked to explore the evolution of school-based management in Queensland schools and noted that when political parties in power changed over the years, so too did education policies. They identified that although the details may have changed due to differing political philosophies, autonomy has consistently been a focus of governments since the Karmel Report, regardless of which party was in power. This is reflective of 'policy as palimpsest' (Carter, 2012; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) wherein policies are re-written over partially erased past policies, the essence of which remains visible in the new policy. Indeed, Moore (2004, p. 42) reflected on the 'Terminator-like' recurrence of discourses relating to education reforms. The recurrence of specific elements such as autonomy, whether in its current form or previous iterations such as school-based management, within the policy landscape in Queensland, serves as an example.

Autonomy in its current form in Australia includes rhetoric that government schools opting to take on more autonomy through programmes like the Independent Public Schools programme are making positive steps, becoming empowered to address their local needs better, and breaking free from bureaucratic systems (Gobby, 2013; Gray et al., 2013). The rhetoric surrounding autonomy is not limited to the IPS programme, however, with rhetoric in systemic strategic documents and policies espousing higher levels of autonomy and community involvement (Queensland Department of Education and Training (QDET), 2014a). In the GERM climate, a major focus for reform is student achievement data. In contrast to the government rhetoric espousing the positive impact of autonomy, research suggests that more autonomy for schools does not necessarily result in improvements in the types of student achievement data currently valued by governments and school systems (Gobby, 2013).

There is a small amount of research that supports the rhetoric that autonomy results in improved academic outcomes, with much of the literature citing Newmann (1996) as the major study to draw these conclusions and Bandur's (2012) review of school-based management literature which suggested that the focus on local needs afforded by this approach does improve outcomes for students as a result. Caldwell (2008) indicated that only recently has an impact on learning been identified. However, he acknowledged that this could be due in part to a shift in research focus more sharply towards learning outcomes, meaning that researchers are now looking for these outcomes rather than for managerial impacts of autonomy.

With little detail available about the autonomy policies currently being enacted in Queensland state schools, there is a body of research worth considering which can inform an understanding of the context for the principals in these case studies. It questions how autonomous a school can really be within a government system, funded with public money and governed by a wider system such as Education Queensland (Gray et al., 2013). The divide between the rhetoric of autonomy and the reality of schools in these positions was described by Adamowski, Bowles Therriault, and Cavanna (2007) as the 'autonomy gap'. This refers to the gap between what principals have identified that they need to do in order to produce the types of data being sought by school systems, and their power to actually implement these changes. Keddie (2014) explored the same notion, identifying that freedom and flexibility inherent in rhetoric about autonomy are hindered by the performative demands of an audit culture (Power, 1994; Strathern, 1997). She commented that increasing surveillance and, I would add, steering of principals' work from a distance (Kickert, 1995), lead to questions about the reality of autonomy.

Adamowski et al. (2007) commented upon the starkness of the autonomy gap for public school leaders, highlighting that it is 'striking how little true authority these principals enjoy in key areas' (p. 31), including budgeting, curriculum, and staffing. Principals who are working to balance autonomy and accountability in the current climate of global reform have accepted the limitations of the system and have learnt to work within the limitations of neoliberal policy conditions (Adamowski et al., 2007) that can result in limited funding, uncertainty, and higher pressures on principals and teachers (Gobby, 2013). Principals, including those within these case studies, have developed strategies for working within the parameters set for their schools and their positions as school leaders. Adamowski et al. (2007) suggested that principals who are more experienced or have been in a district for longer periods of time feel more confident to bend rules without breaking them, allowing them to succeed within the wider system. These principals have also often developed effective working relationships with their supervisors and other stakeholders and are more comfortable in developing tactics to achieve their goals while meeting systemic requirements. This will be explored in depth in Chap. 6 in relation to the strategies that Judy, in particular, has developed to meet her own school's needs and follow her vision of a holistic education at Merriwald while still working effectively in the wider system.

Principals working in environments with higher levels of autonomy report that the complexities of their roles have increased significantly (Gobby, 2013; Trimmer, 2013). Although their workload has increased and many of the changes are synonymous with those pressures that often lead to burnout, including heavy workloads, increased external demands, and complying with a wider range of organisational rules and policies (Tomic & Tomic, 2008), principals have reported higher levels of job satisfaction at the same time (Caldwell, 2008; Trimmer, 2013). This is an important factor to note because there is the potential for these research findings to be used to justify the increased external pressures and systemic expectations of principals.

If autonomy in the current climate is indeed more rhetoric than reality, and if there is a stark gap between what principals can do as opposed to what they need to do to meet systemic expectations of learning outcomes, the question must be asked about

whether principals in this context are really enjoying more power at a local level. Instead, it is possible that principals are simply more effective at working within the parameters set by the school system and global climate of education reform, as the research above has intimated.

Principals may feel that they have higher levels of autonomy, but the literature identifies that this devolution of power from centralised education offices has evolved into a different form of external control, through accountability measures and 'technologies of performance' (Dean, 1999) that steer principals' work from a distance (Caldwell, 2008; Lingard et al., 2002; Niesche, 2011). Kickert (1995) discussed the evolution of this style of government, describing his time in the Dutch Ministry of Education, accurately predicting that after its beginnings in higher education it would spread to primary and secondary education. This mode of governance enables governments or systems to control the work undertaken by principals from a distance, while still espousing the rhetoric that principals have been provided with increased levels of autonomy in their schools. Such technologies of control include approaches such as *MySchool*, transparent publication of school data sets, and external curriculum and financial audits.

Successful principals in such environments are not only able to see the limitations of their context, but can work around these limitations (Adamowski et al., 2007). Further tensions have been identified for principals such as Max, Judy, and Scott, who are working in a climate of high accountability and espoused autonomy or school-based management under neoliberal policies. Principals in these environments are expected to not only meet the demands described above, but also to be 'multi-lingual' in a variety of managerial and instructional language and approaches (Lingard et al., 2002). This also means principals need to be able to balance increased managerial tasks and a focus on teaching and learning with an intention of improving student outcomes, including through various forms of instructional leadership.

Discourses of Instructional Leadership

The literature surrounding instructional leadership falls into two overarching categories. The first explores the effectiveness of focusing on teachers and pedagogy, and the second includes the literature providing specific instructions on how to turn the theory into practice (often based more on practice than on theory). These 'how-to' guides could be viewed within the frame of the Transnational Leadership Packages spoken about by Thomson et al. (2013), consisting of the packaging of (formerly localised) concepts and practices into 'saleable' generalised formats that do not take local contexts or school needs into account. Thomson et al. (2013) spoke about this in a wider framework referring to policy, generalised studies, and practices being sold to governments by consultants, but the principles remain the same for these decontextualised 'how-to' guides.

One contribution of this book towards an understanding of instructional leadership is to add a more complex, contextualised perspective to the literature which

emphasises the nature of specific practices that were enacted in schools under these policy conditions. It will further add to our understanding of the way discourses of instructional leadership impact upon principals and how they constitute school leaders in these conditions. I do not intend to share their stories as 'how-to' success stories of instructional leadership, but rather to identify the practices that are taking place in schools in an effort to better understand how principals' subjectivities are shaped by discourses of instructional leadership.

Some time ago, Harris (2001) called for further case studies on leadership in school improvement. The case studies within this book focus on the actions and leadership skills demonstrated by three principals in Queensland schools as they led improvement in their schools. Fullan and Levin (QDET, 2012) noted in their system review that while Education Queensland 'correctly' defined instructional leadership as a necessary driver for improvement, more clarity was needed around what this looked like within schools. I use the phrase 'instructional leadership' because this is the nomenclature adopted by the Department and thus inherent in the discourses of educational leadership in Queensland.

The phenomenon described by Lingard et al. (2002) wherein autonomy is framed differently under different political parties and contexts is also evident when examining a systemic focus of expectations on principals around instructional leadership. This can be seen in the Queensland context, where under former Premier Anna Bligh's ALP government (2007–2012), instructional leadership with an unrelenting focus on improvement was defined as one of the four pillars of improvement in *United in our Pursuit of Excellence* (QDET, 2011). It indicated six areas for principals to focus on as instructional leaders, including core learning priorities, quality curriculum, student achievement and improvement, pedagogical practice, teacher feedback, and quality assessment.

After a change of state government in 2012, the conservative LNP Newman government's *Great Teachers = Great Results* action plan (introduced in 2013) included a focus on improving outcomes. However, the rhetoric contained within the document shifted away from explicitly describing instructional leadership as a means of doing so. This was echoed in the Department's *2014–2018 Strategic Plan*, which superseded *United in our Pursuit of Excellence* (although the dates included in each document's title overlap, an example of incoming governments introducing palimpsest policies that reflect much of the previous policy). Instead, emphasis was placed on aspects such as teacher performance, through performance reviews, rating teacher effectiveness, and promoting or paying teachers accordingly. Principal instructional leadership is certainly still evident within these documents, but performative measures are included to a higher extent. As discussed previously, the focus for principals on continuous improvement is presented in such a way that insinuates that principals were not previously aiming for continued school improvement, so the solution provided is performance-based contracts. The focus in this document for principals is on outcomes and measurable achievement. Instructional leadership or 'leading learning' (Lingard, 2010, p. 140) is a means to achieving this improvement and thus provides further context for Judy, Max, and Scott's work.

The case studies in this book provide further information for researchers about how principals seek out, interpret, and make sense of instructional and pedagogical practices. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) suggested that research is urgently needed about how successful instructional leaders create the conditions in their schools which promote student learning. These case studies contribute to the literature in this field by critically examining the ways principals responded to the school improvement discourses shaping the principalship. Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (2012) stated that principals alone cannot fulfil the instructional leadership needs of a school. I further expand upon this proposition by investigating how the principals of the three focus schools responded to discourses of instructional leadership and how those discourses shaped the subjectivities of individual principals, as well as influencing the principalship as a wider construct.

The information currently available to principals about effective instructional leadership encompasses general descriptions of effective instructional leadership, but also involves lists of specific tasks and actions to undertake in order to promote student learning. DeBevoise (1984, p. 15) described instructional leadership as 'those actions a principal takes or delegates to others to promote growth in student learning'. According to DuFour (2002), for over thirty years, research has described the importance of principals serving as instructional leaders. During DuFour's time as a principal, he ascribed to the most common interpretation of instructional leadership and focused on the teaching that was taking place in his school, conducting regular observations and meetings with teachers and leading discussions about pedagogy. At some point, however, he decided that student learning, rather than teaching, should be the focus for an instructional leader. He claimed that when student learning was at the forefront of the school's focus, the resulting culture shift was significant and extremely effective.

I would suggest that some of the confusion for principals in the area of instructional leadership lies in the different interpretations of what exactly instructional leadership is and what the system expects it to look like in action. There appears to be two major schools of thought surrounding instructional leadership in the literature, the most pervasive being that principals should focus on the actions of teachers and quality of pedagogy in their schools to promote student learning (as indicated in Queensland through the *Great Teachers = Great Results* action plan and the *2014–2018 Strategic Plan*), with the other approach being to focus on student learning itself (as described by DuFour, 2002).

Inherent Elements of Instructional Leadership—Focusing on Teachers and Teaching

According to Leithwood et al. (2012), instructional leadership has regularly been depicted as being heavily classroom focused with practices recommended to influence classroom curriculum and instruction directly. They described a model of

instructional leadership developed by Philip Hallinger that had three broad goals (define the school mission, manage the instructional programme, and promote the school climate) as well as twenty-one specific actions (including supervising instruction). Hattie (2002) suggested that the main focus of instructional leadership was to have indirect influence over what happens in the classroom by valuing, identifying, and esteeming accomplished teaching.

There is a body of publications that outline specific actions for principals aiming towards improving their instructional leadership capabilities. These books are representative of the 'how to' versions of Thomson et al.'s (2013) transnational leadership package, wherein 'solutions' are bundled into packages to be sold. A common element of this 'how to' type of literature is that it focuses more on effective practices rather than on building theoretical knowledge and emphasises the importance of having a presence in classrooms and encouraging best practice in teachers around planning, pedagogy, assessment, and understanding student data. It provides practical advice about the process of teacher observation, feedback, and modelling exemplary teaching practices within the school.

The main drawback to much of the 'how to' literature about instructional leadership is that it assumes that principals have the time to devote to these activities. This requires principals to make instructional leadership the major focus of their time rather than being distracted by the minutiae of administrative tasks that arise throughout the school day. This is admirable in theory, but in an average school setting demands of a range of complexities from parents or community members, regional and central offices, staff and students can easily shift to the forefront of a principal's priorities. It is not uncommon for principals to find that their plans for classroom observations, curriculum leadership, or working with students can be interrupted by administrative tasks that have no immediate influence on student outcomes (Leonard, 2010). This was reinforced by Hallinger (2003) who noted that managerial elements of leadership are still important for principals. Thus, instructional leadership is just one element of a complex balance of leading and managing for principals; a notion that was evident in the case studies in this book and will be explored in more depth in Chap. 5 in relation to specific experiences shared by Max, Judy, and Scott.

Indeed, according to Elmore (2000), direct instructional leadership is among the least frequent activities performed by administrators. Whitaker (2003) emphasised the potential for this to become a regular issue, encouraging principals to spend time in the classrooms with teachers and students, and stating that it is not possible to lead a school from within the office. Elmore advised principals to form strong networks and to work with teachers and ensure that instruction is at the forefront of the agenda, including blocking off calendars to ensure principals are devoting three mornings per week to classrooms (Costante, 2010).

The requirement for a focus on instructional leadership was reflected in *United in Our Pursuit of Excellence* which required Queensland's public school principals to focus directly on areas including curriculum, student learning and achievement, and pedagogy (QDET, 2011). As described previously, the *Great Teachers = Great Results* action plan introduced in 2013 and the *2014–2018 Strategic Plan* added another level of complexity to this requirement, with a heavier focus on discourses

of teacher and principal performativity with respect to improving student outcomes. Moore (2004) highlighted the difficulty for some educators in balancing their personal philosophies of education with current reform scenarios of performativity, measurement, and 'delivery' of curriculum. This balance will be explored in more depth from Max, Judy, and Scott's perspectives as instructional leaders in one such reform climate.

Educative Dispositions in Performative Cultures

Recent research has explored the intertwined nature of principals' educative dispositions, or educative 'logics' (Hardy, 2015b) and performative cultures. This research has included a focus on the ways some practices in the current climate have dual purposes of meeting performative requirements and enhancing educational outcomes for students, such as the collection and use of student data (Hardy, 2015b), appointment of staff such as literacy and numeracy coaches (Lewis & Hardy, 2015), and even the way performative influences such as NAPLAN were viewed by teachers (Hardy, 2014). Hardy (2015a) did note that the initial appropriation of NAPLAN as an educative element of performative cultures may have shifted as the effects of NAPLAN have become clearer and that these impacts may have become increasingly more significant over time. He commented upon the complex nature of the performative and educative applications of the national testing regime and suggested that while teachers have made efforts to resist the perverse or more performative effects of these practices, the overwhelming scale of NAPLAN could potentially put these more educative logics at risk (Hardy, 2015a).

As such, Hardy (2015b) suggested that careful consideration should be given to whether educative logics can dominate performative logics in the current climate of education, and that it is an area for 'much-needed attention' (p. 483). This book contributes further to this area of research by exploring the intertwined nature of the educative and performative elements of Max, Judy, and Scott's practices and beliefs and how they shaped participants' subjectivities.

Discourses of Accountability

A key discourse frequently recurring throughout the literature relates to increases in accountability for principals. This increase in accountabilities and related discourses is one of the more significant changes to the principalship in recent years; an element representative of neoliberal reform agendas and managerialism. Keddie (2013) drew upon Apple's (2005) research to identify the way the current culture of reform draws upon business-based concepts of measurement and evaluation, requiring schools to meet external standards and accountabilities. Brown (2005) noted that the theme

of external accountability first surfaced globally in the 1970s, as public scrutiny of education increased.

Aligning with this accountability agenda, principals in these case studies were faced with high-stakes testing, an increasing audit culture, public dissemination of data (which is not always contextualised), and a potentially narrow focus on 'outcomes'. As a result of many years of ongoing reform, some researchers (Cranston, 2013; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Niesche, 2015) have suggested that this accountability culture is in danger of becoming unquestioned and that stakeholders need to be more critical of the current climate. This suggestion aligns with findings discussed earlier in this chapter relating to autonomy, wherein some principals are aware of the limitations of the environments in which they work and have found strategies to work around these limitations rather than trying to change the environment or expectations.

Global Increases in Accountability

A US study (Whitaker, 2003) found that principals identified an increase in accountability as the biggest change in the role to date. Globally, accountability reforms in their current incarnation have been more visibly on the rise since the rise of neoliberal policies in education, as well as the new public management reforms of the 1980s that were based on business philosophies. Cranston (2013), Lingard et al. (2013), and Finnigan (2010) are among researchers who have highlighted the elevated levels of accountability facing principals within GERM regimes at this time. In the past decade, educational policies have called for enhanced accountability, including but certainly not limited to the US government's *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* policies (Finnigan, 2010), as well as Australia's Education Revolution proposals (Rudd & Smith, 2007) and Queensland's *Great Teachers = Great Results* (QDET, 2013) and *Every Student Succeeding* (QDET, 2014a). These government initiatives then filter down to education systems, districts, and schools themselves, who have to enact these policies.

One benefit of neoliberal policies in education for governments is the ability to shift focus or responsibility for many of society's troubles back to schools (Hursh, 2013; Lingard et al., 2013). This does, of course, discount the significant amount of research showing that students' backgrounds have a very real impact on their school performance (Hattie, 2011; Lingard et al., 2000). Interestingly, Lingard et al. (2013) commented upon the disconnect between Hattie's work on effects on student learning, which is front-ended by an acknowledgement of the vast impact of socioeconomic factors, students' backgrounds, and the effects of poverty, and the fact that Hattie's work is used by systems and schools to suggest that teachers and teaching have the largest impact on student performance. In fact, they noted that the Queensland Government is using this assumption as the main driver for their policy, *Great Teachers = Great Results*. They suggested that this misalignment between the research and the rhetoric is potentially about fiscal requirements, with history

showing that governments are increasingly asking schools and school leaders to do comparatively more with less funding (Lingard et al., 2002).

Governments selectively choosing which research from the field supports their chosen position are not a new phenomenon. In fact, school reforms are rarely driven by teachers or experts, with Lingard et al. (2002) noting that reforms and restructuring are generally done 'to', rather than 'with' teachers. Cranston (2013) noted that school leaders are sometimes invited to comment on policies after they have been developed, and Lingard (2011) pointed out that the ACARA board does not contain any practicing teachers. This theme continued through the literature, which included comments that stakeholders do not drive policy reform (Goodlad, 2004; Lingard et al., 2002; Puckeridge, 2011) and highlighting that the top-down governmental reform described by Lingard (2011), Lingard et al. (2002), and Cranston (2013) has not been effective in creating long-term, sustainable school improvement (Fullan, 1994; Hopkins & Fraser, 2011).

The current climate of accountability in Western schooling systems, particularly Australia, the USA, and England, is described best by Sahlberg's GERM. As has been discussed, it encompasses high-stakes testing and a standardisation and narrowing of focus in education, alongside a push for business-based models in education (Sahlberg, 2011). In Queensland and wider Australia, this is often a focus specifically on literacy and numeracy—the main focus areas of NAPLAN testing. This aligns with neoliberal education policies encouraging similar approaches and a push towards school privatisation and competition between government schools (Hursh, 2013; Lingard et al., 2000; Niesche, 2015).

In Queensland, in particular, the conservative LNP Newman government's *Strategic Plan 2014–2018* consisted of strong neoliberal language including referring to students, parents, and communities as 'customers', and referring to business models and notions of performativity throughout the document (QDET, 2014b). Hursh (2013) noted that the past three decades of neoliberal reforms in education have had dubious effects upon student outcomes, including a growing achievement gap between students from wealthy and disadvantaged backgrounds, educational practices that focus heavily on preparing students for high-stakes testing, and manipulation of testing scores and benchmarks by school systems and schools themselves. He suggested that educational outcomes have not improved for students in the USA during this time, regardless of the aforementioned policies such as *Race to the Top* and *No Child Left Behind*. However, these policies and their associated practices such as high-stakes testing and external accountabilities have reconstituted what could be defined as 'achievement', with a strong focus on achieving high results on standardised testing. This is a logical extension of these policies in the USA, where teachers' performance is evaluated based in part on these test scores. This notion that high-stakes testing has redefined student achievement was echoed by Gorur (2016, p. 41) who suggested that NAPLAN and *MySchool* have changed the nature of Australian schooling so much that it now resembles the abstract version of education presented through these data mechanisms.

Although the majority of the literature explored the negative impact of policies and practices associated with high-stakes accountabilities, some of the literature

does present alternative interpretations. Hamilton et al. (2007) and Rutledge (2010) reported that a positive effect of these accountability discourses is that teachers are required to focus more closely on the relationship between their teaching and student learning. This aligns with research from Thompson and Mockler (2016) which discussed some affordances of high-stakes testing climates, wherein principals felt that NAPLAN, in particular, had positive effects on their schools' abilities to focus on literacy and numeracy and that the availability of data enabled them to measure school improvement more effectively.

With that said, researchers and practitioners have expressed their concerns about the current climate, characterised in particular by high-stakes testing among other previously discussed elements of neoliberal policy features, having the potential to narrow curriculum foci and reduce teachers' opportunities to apply professional judgments (Luke & Woods, 2008), result in a wider achievement gap for disadvantaged students, present additional challenges for complex school settings (Hardy, 2013b; Lingard et al., 2000), and potentially result in schools and systems manipulating data and related variables due to the public nature of the data (Lingard, 2011; Lingard & Sellar, 2013).

Part of the rhetoric around the school improvement movement is that schools are in crisis. This is present in the public discourse about schooling in the Queensland context, where Thomas (2003) has explored the media construction of discourses of crisis relating to Queensland public schools, and Garrick (2011) highlighted the use of crisis discourses to promote a sense of urgency in the Rudd government's education policies. Researchers have analysed the myriad ways that discourses of crisis have been used to drive education reforms in recent years, including to speed up the pace and increase urgency because 'business as usual is not an option' (Nordin, 2014, p. 118); stirring public support for education reforms (Cohen, 2010); and advocating for a 'back to basics' approach, while positioning teachers in a negative light and attributing blame to them for the perceived failures of education (Thomas, 2003). Cranston (2013) suggested that increased accountability and high-stakes testing is seen as a solution for the 'public mistrust' of educators. This notion was also supported by other researchers (Brown, 2005; Hursh, 2013; Lingard et al., 2013). Hursh (2013) identified the 1983 publication *A Nation at Risk* as the initial move from the US government to shift the blame for wider issues onto schools. He noted that the report placed the burden of the USA's 1980s economic recession on schools, beginning a trend that would see future governments take praise for improvements, while blaming schools for negative results or policy failures. As a result, teachers are often portrayed negatively in the USA, a fact which mirrors Australia's changing circumstances for teachers.

Hardy (2013a) noted the negative media depiction of Queensland's schools (and by extension, educators) after the 2008 NAPLAN results were released. This public mistrust and negative portrayal were seen through intensively focused media pressure on schools in Queensland, particularly in *The Courier Mail*, Queensland's major newspaper, from 2008 and continuing today (Niesche, 2015). Political responses also mimicked those from the 1980s and beyond in the USA, with then Queensland Premier Anna Bligh acknowledging the myriad reasons behind Queensland's compara-

tively poor performance, but stating that she was still 'obligated to respond urgently' to the perceived crisis (Lingard & Sellar, 2013, p. 647). Across Australia, the implementation of NAPLAN in 2008 was one element of a renewed focus on national schooling reforms, many of which have resulted in a higher level of accountability for Australian principals.

Effects of the Current Climate—Narrowed Focus of Schooling

High-stakes testing, public accountability in the form of advocacy for 'transparent data', and external audits or inspections that have the potential for goal displacement (Lingard & Sellar, 2013) mean that schools are balancing increasingly complex agendas. Researchers have commented upon the potential for high-stakes testing, in particular, to narrow the focus of education down to those elements that will impact upon student test results, while neglecting other elements that constitute a holistic education (Bhattacharyya, Junot & Clark, 2013; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Lingard et al., 2000; Minarechová, 2012). Cranston (2013) described this as a double-edged sword, wherein teachers and principals are expected to improve student results significantly and with urgency in very limited areas of the curriculum, while associated government policies, including the Australian government's Melbourne Declaration, espouse the importance of holistic education for all students (MCEETYA, 2008).

Keddie (2014) noted that a standards-driven culture has narrowed curriculum and pedagogy to focus on the range of subjects tested in schools. Similarly, Cranston (2013) suggested that outsiders could potentially be forgiven for thinking that schooling today was mainly about achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics, as these elements of teaching and learning are dominating the popular discourse. A common theme within the literature identifies that globalised education policies position one of the purposes of schooling as being about gaining greater social and economic advantage through creating future citizens who are literate and numerate and will contribute to a strong economy (Goodlad, 2004; Hursh, 2013; Lingard et al., 2013; Sparzo, Bruning, Vargas, & Gilman, 1998). There is resulting concern that other elements of a holistic education such as critical thinking, personal and social development, and celebrations of personal and cultural diversity are potentially being sidelined due to a heavier focus on literacy and numeracy (Agostino & Harcourt, 2010; Keddie, Mills, & Pendergast, 2011; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Minarechová, 2012). Mills and Niesche (2014) described 'academic outcomes being 'valorised' over social outcomes' (p. 2), which supports concerns about certain types of data or achievements being privileged over others.

Lingard et al. (2002) issued a warning about the need for caution about external testing in terms of having a negative flow-on effect upon pedagogy and curriculum and potentially de-skilling teachers. Luke and Woods (2008) echoed the concerns about a heavy focus on 'mandating content and method' (p. 17) potentially de-skilling teachers.

Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2012) discussed a practice wherein some teachers and schools focus their resources and attention on students who will make a difference to their overall scores on NAPLAN (those students close to the next band or minimum standard) and, in the process, may neglect other students until the test is over. This practice is reminiscent of emergency medical practices of selectively prioritising treatment for those who will benefit from it most, and has been labelled 'educational triage' (Saltmarsh & Youdell, 2004). Researchers have criticised this practice as maintaining the status quo for many students and even increasing attainment gaps, as well as ensuring that schools are complicit in furthering the marginalisation of groups of students including those mentioned previously, who will not necessarily gain from a learning environment which is shaped in response to these external pressures (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Marks, 2012; Saltmarsh & Youdell, 2004; Youdell, 2004). This practice has become formally entrenched in policy in some parts of Australia, with the New South Wales government's *Bump it Up* strategy utilising this approach with an explicit goal of improving NAPLAN results (New South Wales Department of Education, n.d.).

The influence of the climate of accountability and high-stakes testing can be seen in these practices, as well as other practices described above that circumvent productive interventions for teaching and learning. Lingard and Sellar (2013) found an uncritical acceptance of current accountability practices from some practitioners and researchers which led to these types of approaches and which needs to be challenged. This, again, links to literature related to autonomy wherein principals may accept the pressures and context of the system and adjust their work within those parameters (Adamowski et al., 2007; Caldwell, 2008).

A particular challenge for schools in these case studies is finding the balance and negotiating the roles in a climate where autonomy and accountability, two premises with different meanings and implications, are both increasingly present. Indeed, Caldwell (2008) noted that as autonomy increases for principals, external accountabilities will often increase at the same time. This serves to steer or govern principals' work in other ways, through specific targets and frameworks. These competing discourses of accountability and autonomy were acknowledged by Queensland's Education Department in 1990, which acknowledged that principals needed to 'live with the tension of being both autonomous and accountable' (Lingard et al., 2002 p. 17).

Conclusion

Queensland's principals are under 'increased accountability surveillance' (Lingard & Sellar, 2013, p. 651) and face unprecedented levels of public scrutiny, particularly as a result of the response to the state's performance on the 2008 NAPLAN tests. Discourses of accountability in performative cultures bring about discussions relating to job security for principals deemed to be underperforming, and debates about sanctions and rewards for principals based on measurements of quality and effectiveness. These discourses are compounded by public perceptions of schooling,

often constructed through discourses of crisis derived from media coverage of school reform issues. Indeed, policy is driven by this crisis narrative at times, with politicians feeling obligated to respond to these public concerns. The resulting public scrutiny of teachers can be linked to the 'tyranny of transparency' (Strathern, 2000) and further contributes to the pressure on teachers and principals in Queensland. In a sense, the actions undertaken by principals to meet performative requirements are highly visible as a result of public availability of data and the perpetual surveillance of school leaders.

This chapter has shown that public and transparent data (a pillar of the government's education reforms) are one means of controlling what happens in classrooms, making the data and its public nature a technology of surveillance (Foucault, 2003). Publicly available data, often decontextualised, provide the public with the means of making judgments about the complex work undertaken in schools. This is particularly damaging for schools deemed to be underperforming, because it perpetuates the cycle of deficit discourses surrounding these schools (Niesche, 2013, p. 9). These deficit discourses lead to the question of what data are privileged and marginalised in a climate of heavy external accountability such as that in which the principals in these case studies work. The nature of public accountabilities can have 'perverse' (Lingard & Sellar, 2013) effects including educational triage, overt and covert manipulation of data, and a narrowed focus of curriculum.

At the same time, as principals are working in these contexts of heavy external accountabilities and scrutiny, the rhetoric surrounding the principalship is that leaders have more autonomy to make the decisions needed for their school communities. This chapter highlighted the elements of policy as palimpsest (Carter, 2012), noting the 'terminator-like' recurrence of reform discourses including school autonomy (Moore, 2004, p. 42). Considering Lingard et al.'s (2002) finding that autonomy is influenced by the current 'political, social and cultural practices and discourses' of the climate, the enactment of autonomy discourses can change depending on the context or climate of the system in which principals work. As such, this chapter questioned how autonomous a school can really be within the wider system. Using research findings relating to the notion of the autonomy gap, it highlighted that principals are working within the parameters set by the climate of reform. While successful principals are said to be able to bend a rule without breaking it, this still means they are being disciplined to work in the ways the system wants, because rules can only really be bent so far. Thus, these accountability measures and technologies of performance steer their 'autonomous' work from a distance.

One such technology of performance (Dean, 1999) was the discourse and associated expectations related to explicit expectations to act as an instructional leader. Principals must balance the explicit requirement for them to act as instructional leaders alongside demands created by a heightened culture of accountability and a perceived climate of more autonomy for principals, two paradigms which demonstrate a tension in and of themselves when linked together in such a manner. In this chapter, I explored the ways principals might constitute themselves as school leaders in these positions and highlighted an emerging area of research showing that school leaders are seeking to find a balance between more educative logics and requirements

inherent in performative cultures. Principals' instructional leadership practices can serve dual purposes, at the same time meeting performance requirements and providing students with enhanced educational outcomes.

In the next chapter, I shift into a focus on the case study context, with an in-depth exploration of the policy conditions that influenced the principalship in these schools. The forthcoming chapters will investigate how the principals in three schools balance these competing paradigms of accountability and autonomy with system requirements to focus on instructional leadership for school improvement at the forefront of their agenda.

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