Chapter 8
Implications for Leadership

I began this study seeking to better understand the impact of the introduction of an ensemble of policies I myself was expected to enact. During the research period as I moved to a position outside of the system, I was able to observe the disciplining of the principalship (Foucault, 1977; Niesche, 2011) as practices evolved and more policies and discourses were added to the expectations governing participants' work. As Alvesson (2011) suggested, the real nature of the study emerged over the period of the research project. The longitudinal nature of this study and my own experiences and knowledge from my time within the Department afforded me the opportunity to observe these changes over time and to collect rich, detailed data through these case studies. The nature of the wider case focusing on one particular schooling system within one region in Queensland provided an opportunity to explore the implications of an ensemble of specific policy conditions in a more delineated context. Given the findings about the impact of discourse as conversation and the unwritten rules of leadership, the principals' shared context was an important element of the study because it provided an opportunity to examine the impact of the shared discourses within that particular region. As highlighted by Mills et al. (2014), 'policy borrowing' (Lingard, 2010) means that findings from studies from within one system can be used to make sense of systems with similar policy conditions in other locations.

What Has This Book Taught Us About Leadership?

This study is one of the first to take a longitudinal approach to analyse the effects of this post-NAPLAN policy ensemble in Queensland. In doing so, it has contributed to our collective understanding of the influence of contemporary policies and related discourses on principals' subjectivities in a climate of urgent reforms. The findings from this book also contribute to understandings of how the shift to a performativity-informed form of instructional leadership (aiming towards specific aspects of educational achievement) has been interpreted and how these discourses

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shaped participants' conceptualisations of the principalship, as well as their practices as school leaders. The findings of this book also provide an exploration of the intertwined nature of participants' educative dispositions with the performative cultures of the system and how this influenced participants' work. It has provided further evidence of the way policies and discourses steer the work of principals from a distance, disciplining them to act and respond in ways that achieved the system's stated intentions of improved student achievement on clearly defined metrics.

In seeking to understand how discourses of educational leadership in the current climate shaped the subjectivities of principals working within the Queensland state schooling system, this study established that the shift from manager to instructional leader and the associated expectations from the system had been a source of pressure for participants. Difficulties also arose from a lack of clarity about how to enact the aforementioned discourses of leadership as framed within a school improvement agenda. The study highlighted the ways external accountabilities took time away from the educative aspects of leadership and that, regardless of the policies and discourses requiring principals to be instructional leaders, managing still overrode leading when clashes arose between the two. This leads to questions about how realistic the shift in role expectations has been, confirming findings from previous research that while more has been added to principals' work, few responsibilities have been taken away.

System representatives implied that it was up to principals to delegate these responsibilities so they could focus on enacting the Department's instructional leadership agenda; however, principal participants suggested that they saw their role as providing opportunities for learning and teaching to take place in the school, and thus these management duties still formed part of their own responsibilities as principals. Perhaps partly in response to this, but also due in part to their own philosophies of leadership and learning, Max, Judy, and Scott found ways to work around the system's explicit instructional leadership requirements. They saw their roles not as the heroic curriculum expert, but as being to develop the skills and instructional leadership capabilities of their staff, resulting in a team of instructional leaders with shared expertise.

These additional expectations and requirements of principals, in combination with the nature of performative cultures, resulted in a sociality of anxiety (Keddie, 2013), and this research found that quality of leadership could be perceived as success in performative metrics in the areas being valued highly by the system, with school data serving as a strong discourse found within policy documents and Departmental rhetoric. Notions of quality and effectiveness also aligned with levels and styles of supervision for principals, with more autonomy being given to school leaders who were deemed to be effective in their roles. The relationship between participants and their supervisors was complex. Even Max, Judy, and Scott, all very experienced principals within this region, discussed tensions between how they saw the role of principals' supervisors (likely influenced by its previous incarnation as a top-down supervisory role) and the professional companioning approach now encouraged by the Department (borne partly from the rhetoric around principal accountability and autonomy). The principalship was being constructed in an environment with heavy external accountabilities, and leaders were disciplined to work in certain ways

as a direct response to these accountabilities, so were perhaps less likely to need 'managing' from their supervisors.

Whereas the rhetoric from the case study context was that principals had been given more autonomy, the study supported previous findings that it is difficult to be wholly autonomous in a wider system. With that said, the study provided evidence of suggestions from participants that as long as their school data profiles were improving, they were afforded more freedom to work in ways they deemed appropriate, as evidenced by the work being undertaken at Mount Pleasant prior to their commencement in the IPS programme. The performative and quantitative natures of education were evident here, particularly in Scott's comments that improved results mattered the most in a numerical system, and that the Department just wanted to see improvement in the data.

These discourses of improvement were the key factor influencing the principalship. What this meant for 'the knitting', or participants' key priorities, varied among participants, but they shared the same overarching goal of school improvement in performative ways, as required by the system. Tensions were evident at times during this study between these performative requirements and participants' educative dispositions. The study found these two elements to work in tandem much of the time due to the nature of performative cultures requiring principals to work in certain ways to be deemed successful, and having changed what success actually meant for student achievement.

In Queensland, the system-generated data profile was the predominant measure of success and of quality leadership. It dictated which principals received support from regional staff, what level of support they were given if they were deemed to be requiring further development, or what sort of freedom they were afforded if they were deemed to be quality leaders. Therefore, participants responded to the performative aspects of the emphasis on the data profile in certain ways, aligning with performative practices such as focusing on specific elements of education that would provide improvement in this profile, or adopting the data profile itself as a driver for their own school's agenda. In contrast, more educative practices were also evident where participants contested some of the more problematic practices by filtering departmental directives and deciding what to adopt or introduce to their school communities based on their perceptions of what would benefit their students and staff. A shared practice that could be interpreted as both performative and educative was participants' focus on individual journeys of students, which was performative in a sense because participants were deemed to 'own' the responsibility for the results of each student and they gathered more data in a pursuit of a 'bigger picture' of achievement, but educative in another sense because these additional data were gathered in an attempt to better capture a wider view of academic and social aspects of students' learning.

The complex nature of these practices highlights the way these discourses and school improvement policies have influenced the principalship during the period of these case studies.

Implications for Leadership Scholars

This book holds possibilities for scholars interested in adopting these critical theories as tools for analysis. I have made use of Lyotard's (1984) notions of performativity to understand the impact of these discourses and policies on the principalship. The culture of enumeration (Hardy, 2015a) and the trust placed in numbers (Porter, 1995) aligns with Lyotard's (1984, p. 7) reference to 'scientific knowledge'. Such scientific knowledge is associated with discourses of objectivity such as those surrounding numbers and data. The contribution of this book is also in theorising participants' discussion about the 'story behind the data' and their frequent comments about how they would frame or discuss school data with various members of their school community as the 'narrative knowledge' that Lyotard (1984, p. 7) noted must exist in addition to, in competition with, and is often subjugated by scientific knowledge in these performative cultures. The importance placed by participants on the story behind the data serves as a way of understanding how narrative knowledge was still considered important in a performative culture. Participants used narrative to explain and justify practices in relation to the scientific data. In fact, findings showed that the narrative knowledge even drove scientific knowledge at times, such as when participants collected additional data to provide information that would supplement their narrative of individual 'learning journeys' for students.

Lyotard's work was also used in particular to analyse the ways participants responded to the system's directives and discourses. While much of Foucault's work focuses on power and forms part of the theoretical framework in this book, Lyotard's description of language games provided an interesting new way to consider participants' positioning within a performative culture; in particular, their responses to the mechanisms steering their work at a distance (Kickert, 1995). When discussing language games, Lyotard noted that when a performative statement is made, the addressee is altered because the statement itself alters the environment in which the addressee is positioned. He noted, however, that nobody is powerless and that there is some mobility in how people respond to these messages. Theorising performative requirements through this lens, I have suggested that participants chose to respond to performative system requirements, discourses, or initiatives in various ways that enabled them to exercise their power, and they did this for various reasons. Examples of this included: Max deciding to not pass on 'messages' that might detract from his school's focus; Richard seeking to reposition NAPLAN as being less powerful in the data landscape in the region; and Judy's intent of lessening the workload and potential for 'initiativitis' (Carter, 2012) on her staff by not adopting all initiatives that arose during the case studies.

These theoretical contributions provide a new way of understanding the way principals might use narrative knowledge to reclaim some power from scientific and 'objective' measures of education, which could be useful, given Moore's (2004) findings that some educators face difficulties when trying to balance educative dispositions (Hardy, 2015b) with performative requirements. This contribution also

provides another way of understanding shifting power in the principalship, and principals' responses to wider performative requirements and initiatives from systems.

Another key contribution of this book was the application of the macro- and micro-layers of theoretical resources in the design and analysis of this research. I have responded to calls for research to make use of poststructural theory to analyse educational leadership in the current climate of school reform (Eacott & Evers, 2015; Niesche & Gowlett, 2015) and built further upon research that has made use of Foucault's theories (including Gillies, 2013; Niesche, 2011, 2015, 2016; Niesche & Keddie, 2016) and Lyotard's notions of performativity (Keddie, 2013; Lingard, 2013; Singh, 2014) to better understand the experiences and subjectivities of participants. The application of a theoretical framework that layered the use of poststructural theory at a macro-(system) level with theory at a micro (individual)-level responded to calls (Niesche, 2013, p. 145) to use Foucault's work to better understand the 'complex terrain and shifting situations school leaders face'. Working with Lyotard's theories in parallel with Foucault's theories provided a unique way of understanding principals' leadership practices; in particular, the interplay between performative moves from a system with an improvement agenda, and the impact of these moves on individual school leaders. The approach of an application of layered theories could be adopted by future researchers in a range of fields to theorise how individuals are positioned by systems, how they choose to respond to system requirements, and how their subjectivities might be shaped by systems.

Implications for Policymakers

Findings of the study could support policy makers to better understand the impact of school improvement policy ensembles and how these demands might be balanced with the management demands inherent in the principalship.

In addition to this, an implication for leadership practices can be found in the responses from supervisors and the system at large in terms of data and leadership. Some principals (although not Max, Judy, or Scott) were described by participants as expressing unease about seeking help in this environment—participants suggested that seeking help in some principals' minds might have equated to seeming incompetent. On the other hand, principals who are confident in their place in the local (regional) hierarchy such as Max, Judy, and Scott seemed to be more confident to make use of the support structures available to them. If this is a trend that continues beyond the principals in these case studies, it has significant implications for leadership at large in terms of principals' development and leadership capacity building, but also stress and resulting mental health concerns for principals who feel unable to seek support in a highly pressurised environment.

Given the study's findings confirming the existence of a sociality of anxiety in this particular context—the urgency of the discourses surrounding reform and improvement—and the impact of the measurement and discourse of quality in the principalship, system leaders could use the findings to support the development of a culture

of support and professional capability or capacity building, emphasising the use of data as a learning process as Tracy suggested, rather than the use of school data as measures of principal quality.

Implications for Leaders

The stories within this book hold lessons for leaders who are working under similar policy conditions. Whether Judy's, Max's, or Scott's story resonated with you, there are connections or experiences within these pages that are common for many leaders.

Judy's commitment to maintain a focus beyond that which can be easily measured may seem like an approach worth emulating. Her focus on the school's vision and her ways of working with her school community seem to many to be potentially out of reach in an environment where data—and specifically narrow forms of it—have proliferated policy and discourse. However, Judy shows us that it is possible to satisfy the performative requirements of the principalship and still maintain a commitment to a picture of schooling that is bigger and, I would argue, richer, than what policy currently emphasises.

What specifically could be done? By developing and maintaining a vision with her community, Judy remains accountable to them before filtering departmental requirements through their shared purpose of schooling. To satisfy the performative requirements of the principalship, Judy works incredibly hard to maintain a good track record. On a technical level, she complies with regional and departmental regulations. She takes on teachers with challenging backgrounds (where other schools might not) and supports them to succeed. She works hard to maintain relationships with her school community that result in high opinion survey outcomes and no complaints to her supervisors.

Importantly, her data trends are steady. Make no mistake, she was clear that this was a vital aspect of her track record and subsequently being given higher levels of autonomy. The school emphasises academic achievement, but by focusing on individual journeys and success, she can also show progress and meet performative targets that allow the school to focus on the things that she believes matters.

Other readers might connect more with Max. Nearing the end of his career, Max is incredibly experienced, incredibly knowledgeable, and incredibly confident in his vision and his position. He knows how far he can bend rules without breaking them, because he knows the rules back to front. Max, not seeking promotion or relocation, feels far less beholden to the rules of engagement under current policy conditions. Whereas Judy is compliant and feels the pressure to stick to timelines and tasks, Max works to his own timelines—defined and refined over decades of leadership in the department. He, like Judy, has built strong relationships and a reputation, and a bank of trust that withstands his pushing back on initiatives and pressures.

Max felt the same levels of autonomy as formalised IPS principals. He did what he felt he had to do to make his school the best it could be. He was conscious of data and used it to drive the agenda. However, for as long as I have known him, that has

been the case, so this was not as large of a shift for Max as it was for some of the other principals. Indeed, the key shift for Max has been the availability of data that he can use to prosecute his agenda.

Max and Judy both built strong and experienced leadership teams in their schools. Their jobs were more strategic, while their leadership teams could focus on the school improvement agenda. Having staff devoted specifically to school improvement (be it through curriculum, teacher development, or working with specialists) surely influenced their data trends. Some readers might be thinking at this point that this is all well and good, but that they are without a leadership team to provide this kind of strategic support. Enter Scott.

Scott was adept with working with what he had. He thought outside the box and sought ways to make the changes he felt were needed. Take, for example, the narrowed curriculum focus at Mount Pleasant. Scott saw a need to do 'something different', decided on a plan, and found ways to make it happen. Starting in small ways (removing the requirement for students to learn an additional language), he then moved bigger into removing more mainstream curriculum areas from the school's offering. Opinion will be divided about the choice they made in doing so, but Scott was adamant that he and the school were working towards a form of social justice by giving their students opportunities to achieve equally on the areas being emphasised by the Department.

Moving beyond that approach, Scott's other key move that is achievable (and much of the leadership literature emphasises is desirable) was to take a distributed leadership approach. He invested in the people in his school, identifying their strengths and passions and creating a team of teacher leaders. Readers could consider their own contexts and the people with whom they work, who might be able to take on leadership roles. We know—and it was confirmed by these case studies—that leaders can struggle to balance leading and managing. Who might be able to take the lead in your school? Who can you work with to develop passion and interest in the area you want to develop but can't find the time to do so? This would be a logical starting point to try to adopt and adapt some of Scott's, Max's, and Judy's approaches to distributed leadership in your school.

Like Max and Judy, Scott had a strong relationship with his supervisors and the regional office, built on a track record of trust and collegiality. There are lessons to be learnt from this in terms of being proactive and collegial—not being afraid to ask for support or help. I do acknowledge, though, that not all environments are conducive to this kind of trust, support, or collegiality. Taking time to establish yourself as a leader (as Max described, and as was evident in Scott's stories)—getting to know the school and community, and the people with whom you'll be working, are all strategies each of the principals emphasised as vital for success.

Concluding Thoughts

New policies and practices focusing on school improvement imperatives, along with a sense of urgency, have been accompanied by an increase in discourses of

accountability, autonomy, instructional leadership, and the datafication of education in this context. This book has contributed to the field's understanding of the impact of these discourses on individual participants' subjectivities, as well as to the principalship itself. Max, Judy, and Scott balanced their educative dispositions as school leaders with the performative cultures and quantification of education that were inherent within their wider shared context. These two elements of leadership were closely intertwined at many stages; the performative influencing the educative and vice versa when principals had to balance their vision of the principalship with the discourses governing their practices. In a bid for school improvement, by quantifying and measuring student outcomes, the system also quantified and measured principals' work, resulting in new practices and constructs within the principalship.

The changes resulting from these policies and discourses are taking place in school systems around the world (c.f. Sahlberg, 2011), and by illuminating the experiences of three principals in the shared context of a specific policy moment, I have highlighted the significance of the impact these changes can have on school leaders and on the principalship itself. These rich stories of the impact of rising external accountabilities have highlighted the complex nature of the principalship, and the importance of principals being able to find a balance between an educative focus and the performative demands of external accountabilities. Judy highlighted the balance she had to find as principal, commenting that 'I know I've got to meet those demands, but I'm still not going to be drawn away from that core of what we're really here for'. Judy, in particular, appeared to move beyond the performative and focus on the educative with a heavy emphasis on holistic education for the students at Merriwald. In contrast, Scott and Max also expressed educative goals for their students but performative influences were more evident in these goals, which focused more explicitly on improving students' skills in the literacy and numeracy practices measured by testing.

Thinking back to the conference in 2011 that sparked my research focus, I did not at the time understand the enormity of the changes that faced Queensland's state school leaders. Although we commented at the time on the sense of urgency we felt from our Departmental leaders, I did not anticipate how sweeping the changes would be, or how the principalship itself would evolve so rapidly and so vastly. The discourses that 'swarm and seethe' (Ball, 1999, p. 14) around the principalship have changed what it means to be a principal in a time of rapid global reforms. Methods of disciplining the principalship, including the use of school data as surveillance and policies and discourses that closely directed the work of schools, have reconstituted the work of principals even as they sought to contest some of the more performative practices inherent in these reform agendas. In this book, I have explained and explored the tensions experienced by principals in a period of rapid reform, using layers of theories to come to better understand the way the system's school improvement agenda has shaped the principalship at a macro-level, as well as the way principals' subjectivities were constructed at a micro-level as they navigated within and around these reforms.

This book builds upon the scholarship that came before it, and provides a solid foundation for future work. Policies are continually evolving, along with discourses

about schools, school improvement, teachers, and leadership. It is clear that expectations for leaders enacting these policies are complex and require difficult choices of principals who are trying to balance their visions of schooling alongside the shifting requirements of their roles. While we know that it is not a new phenomenon for schools to be the targets for reform and improvement agendas, we also know that the ways these agendas play out can shift practices and school priorities dramatically in relatively short periods of time. Critical theory has a long history of providing ways of thinking about these ideas and while it might not provide a simple solution or list of strategies, it helps us to better understand the particular challenges and nuances of leading schools in times of highly pressurised change. Stories matter in helping us to understand the lives and experiences of the people leading these changes. By sharing their stories, Max, Judy, and Scott have provided new insights into the particular challenges principals face in a journey towards school improvement, and in balancing wider priorities and goals with their own senses of what matters in leadership, and in schooling.

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