

Chapter 1

Scope, Position and Sequence



This book seeks to contribute to the field of critical leadership studies by invoking *paradox* as an intervention in the constitutive politics of school principals. It proposes that, in neoliberal times, the subjectivity of principals is better understood in its paradoxy¹ than in the austere and essentialist accounts of school leadership that currently prevail. In *Paradox and the School Leader*, I am concerned with the ‘soul’ of the principal, conceived, after Foucault (1977), as a product of various forms of power exercised around, on and within the principal subject. Fifteen paradoxes derived from theoretical and empirical analysis are used to provide insights into the competing forces that haunt and contradict simplistic positivist accounts of contemporary school leadership and to reveal the presence of a political struggle for the soul of the principal in this neoliberal era.

It Is and It Isn’t

The apparent confidence and likely conceits of this opening statement serve to sharpen the need to shift this introduction into more equivocal territory in order to resolve questions of scope, positionality and sequence. What follows is not just an explanation of what the book is about, but also what it is not. Such an approach describes choices made within different sets of contestable ideas. It is aimed at outlining the scope and fixing the position of this book more precisely in a broader field while, at the same time, filling out otherwise disingenuous claims about its modest, uncertain and partial contribution. Inextricably tied to the book’s ontological, epistemological and methodological premises, this work of articulating and defending

¹ The word ‘paradoxy’, which refers to ‘the quality or state of being paradoxical’ (paradoxy, 2019), appears to have enjoyed prominence during the Renaissance when the revival of ancient paradoxes became a popular form of amusement and public entertainment. It is used in this book to denote a state of ambiguity, tension and conflict in the lives and work of principals.

decisions made, orientations preferred, and risks taken is directed to making the intentions of the book more transparent and intelligible. The placing of this book within four such ‘contests’ is now described.

A Focus on the Principal

At a recent anniversary celebration of one of the schools in which I had worked as a school principal, I was intrigued by the prominence given to former principals in attendance. The six of us were introduced individually and then paraded as a group at the front of the crowd. The formal celebrations were entirely taken up by speeches from the current principal and two previous principals. This programming choice was noteworthy for its selective recognition of principals who had essentially transitioned through the school, often as a stepping stone to more senior appointments, and the absence of representation from a large section of the audience who had worked in the school for far longer and, arguably, made a greater professional commitment and gained a more extensive understanding of the school’s history.

I use this example as a localised illustration of the taken-for-granted *primacy* bestowed on principals in contemporary schooling and to introduce my case for focussing this book on school principals and their work. In naming and separating out the principal position, I run the risk of overplaying its importance and, through the denotative effect of the language, immediately attaching normalised meaning and an expectation of explanatory potential. I seek to overcome these effects by taking principals as discursively constituted subjects and by identifying and explicating a range of tensions that, I contend, are ubiquitous and deeply affecting in their lives and work. This means, for example, examining the principalship in terms of its complexity, variety and limitations, interrogating and destabilising assumptions about principals and their work and critically examining the often automatic conflation of ‘principal’ and ‘leadership’. My intention is, therefore, to regard the grammar as *connotative* – to treat the position of principal as one that is arbitrarily constructed and so able to be considered both in terms of the forces by which it is constituted and its alternative conceptions.

A more pragmatic response to risks of nomenclature and attribution is to recognise that the principal position (or its equivalent) exists in virtually all schools, that certain qualities and responsibilities are widely attached to it and that it is clearly distinguishable from other designated leadership positions in schools. For better or for worse, principals generally exert more power and control than others in the school over processes of resource management, direction setting and planning, marketing and promotion, decision-making and resolution of personnel issues. They are well positioned to see how their school fits within a broader system and to ‘capture the bureaucratic apparatus’ (van Bommel & Spicer, 2017, p. 152) in ways that allow them to be directly influential in the lives of others. Furthermore, from my observation, principal’s work is characterised by more diverse and pressing demands. In turn, this means they see and experience a wider range of complexities and, as

designated leaders, are drawn to responses that minimise uncertainty and set clear and unambiguous direction.

A (Particular) Critical Orientation

In *Paradox and the School Leader*, I endeavour to work within some of the broad parameters that mark out and distinguish the field of critical leadership studies. These include critiquing populist notions of leadership and pervasive functionalist assumptions about leadership as fixed and natural, developing an interest in the social and discursive construction of leadership and of leader's identities, surfacing and interrogating existing structures of power and control and exploring expanded notions of democracy, fairness and freedom in directing analysis towards emancipatory goals.

However, contrary to a picture of apparent uniformity and containment, studies that claim a critical orientation range across broad and, at times, difficult territory. As Collinson (2011) observes, critical leadership studies 'do not constitute a unified set of ideas, perspectives or a single community of practice', but rather, the field 'comprises a variety of approaches informed by an eclectic set of premises, frameworks and ideas' (p. 181). The critical field is also marked by relatively low levels of scholarly engagement. Niesche (2018) notes that critical approaches to the study of leadership have generally 'hovered in the wings of mainstream educational leadership' because of 'the erroneous assumption that such approaches have little to offer those seeking best practice' (p. 145). In a field of heterogeneous approaches, porous borders and modest take-up, it becomes necessary to both clarify more exactly where this book locates itself in the broader field and to state a case for the theoretical and practical importance of the critical position that it embraces.

Popkewitz's (1999) room metaphor allows a more accurate positioning on the critical 'leadership terrain'. Popkewitz imagines a 'social room' where most of the space is taken with finding 'useful' knowledge and using 'the procedures of measurement and the rules for collecting data' – what he calls 'pragmatic-empiricism' (p. 2). Such research work focuses on the internal logic of institutions, such as schools, and is committed to gaining conceptual clarity and to connecting better and more efficient systems of administration to social progress. Squeezed into the end of this room are a group of 'critical' researchers with somewhat different concerns. Their focus is on 'how existing social relations can be interrogated to understand issues of power and institutional contradictions' (Popkewitz, 1999, p. 3). With its emphasis on the critical tradition of thinking otherwise, this book is most often positioned at this end and, at its most ambitious, in the corner that determinedly holds to productive practices of critical thought and to emancipatory goals.

In this relatively small and often derided space, I am concerned with connecting thought to knowledge and theory to practice. I am interested in power relations and how principals are implicated in policies and structures that impose on their freedom and that of other individuals and groups in schools. To this end, I seek to

constructively interrogate the agency of principal subjects in both my critique of social, political and structural constraints and my exploration of possibilities in struggle and resistance, reviving of contradictory discourses and ethical practices of the self.

My epistemological positioning within the critically oriented field is also fixed more exactly by a determination to strike the difficult balance between non-normative critique, with its requirement to abstain from normative judgement and refuse to build new solutions to existing problems, and the more pragmatic call of performative critique (see Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; van Bommel & Spicer, 2017) to be braver about tackling issues that actually matter and more savvy about the political work of making a difference. The balance I endeavour to strike is well captured by Ball's claim that the critical case is made powerful in social analysis because it 'means being difficult and constructive at the same time' (Ball, 2006, p. 3–4).

My settling of this apparent tension is not founded on a wholly negative critique of school leaders or in siding with what van Bommel and Spicer (2017) describe as an 'elite group of intellectual naysayers' (p. 6). Nor am I overly concerned with proposing alternatives to current norms as expressed in dominant discourses or in taking up and expanding the 'what works' agenda of positivist studies. Rather, I prefer the affirmative stance of non-normative critique, in order to problematise and repoliticise contemporary and pervasive modes of governing (Hansen, 2016, p. 129) and to edge critique towards a more just – less oppressive – social world. More specifically, my aim is to engage in what Foucault (2007) calls 'tactically effective analysis' (p. 3) by exploring the political agency available to principals through ideas associated with agonistic resistance and democratic designs for school leadership.

Finally, in this donning of the 'critical' label, it is important to note the joining of the epistemological positioning of this book with conceptualisations typically associated with post-structuralist theory. While it has spawned a 'proliferation of conflicting definitions' (Lather, 2007, p. 5), the general concerns of post-structuralism are with disrupting the normative ways of understanding the world (Khoja-Moolji, 2014, p. 277) and foregrounding 'the contingent aspects of complex systems' (Woermann, 2016, p. 5). The objectivity of the sciences and positivist assumptions about the capacity to discover an absolute and generalisable truth are thus marginalised in favour of taking knowledge as socially constituted and allowing 'space for multiple, even contradictory, positions to be held as truths' (Khoja-Moolji, 2014, p. 279).

A Paradox Conceptual Frame

Rather than embracing complexity and plurality, literature about educational leadership has tended towards more reductive, positivist studies that often overlook or minimise the diversity, ambivalence and tension in the school workplace (see

Niesche, 2018). As a result, within this body of work, there is scant evidence of a scholarly interest in using the theoretical and conceptual resources of paradox. *Paradox and the School Leader*, with its objective of connecting paradox in the lives and work of school principals with the interests of educational leadership, is, therefore, something of a transgression into unoccupied territory – a manoeuvre that must draw widely from historical and contemporary sources beyond the field of education in order to attenuate the solitude and risk of cutting entirely new ground. By way of introduction, I will distil this work into four themes that are prominent in this book in order to better elucidate a paradox conceptual frame and to highlight choices made from the bigger field.

Firstly, in the debate about the nature and ontology of paradox (e.g. in Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Smith & Lewis, 2011), my deployment relies on a 'constitutive approach' (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016). Such an approach takes paradox as formed out of the constitutive practices of discourses rather than functioning as representations of conflict or complexity. The apparent symmetry and pragmatism of two-sided conflict is replaced with an array of competing discourses, marked by variations across space and time, differential interminglings with local practice and asymmetrical levels of prominence and influence. In this 'tangled plurality' of practices (Foucault, 1972, p. 53), I turn to Foucault's theoretical insights to help explain what discourse does (or is doing) in situations where paradoxes form. In this constitutive approach, the epistemological space I am looking to occupy is neither neutral nor apolitical. I seek to problematise and make vulnerable the discourses that dominate contemporary schooling and to reveal, through the formulation of various paradoxes, the competing interests that shape and influence principals and their work.

This work of problematisation highlights a second theme associated with the conceptual reach of paradox and, concomitantly, with the challenge of giving paradox sufficient heft and girth to support critically oriented work. Pushing hegemonic claims into uncertain territory often shifts my use of paradox into what Lather (2007) describes as 'the between space of any knowing'. In this space, I look to generate thought and knowledge that is not currently available from 'the vantage point of our present regimes of meaning' (p. 16) by taking paradox as a theorising tool for *thinking* and as a lens for *looking* critically and differently at the constitutive politics of principal subjectivity. This additional reach for paradox is underpinned by Colie's (1966) seminal text *Paradoxia Epidemica*, where her interest in the revival of 'formal paradoxy' in the Renaissance (p. 4) includes the notion of the 'epistemological paradox' and the range of possibilities it carries for countering received opinion, challenging rational discourse, stimulating further questions and speculating on new possibilities.

Thirdly, the implications for considering paradox as formed in the constitutive practices of discourse are not confined just to contemplating what discourse is doing when paradox forms and develops. Importantly, they extend to include the conditions set by discourse for how actors appropriate and manage contradictions in their workplace (see Putnam et al., 2016). This book notes the emphasis on responding to paradoxical tension in management and organisational studies that adds significantly to the language of paradox and to the theoretical content that deals with the

merits and implications of the various processes of separation, compromise, synthesis, convergence, acceptance and accommodation.

However, a more crucial interest of this book is in post-structural ideas about non-closure of meaning, contingent knowledge and radical ambiguity. Such ideas favour responses that accept and accommodate paradox. They recruit the language of ‘antinomy’ and ‘aporia’ to support holding open the sides of a persistent tension, rather than seeking its expedient resolution. In this book’s focus on the shaping of principals and their work, this preference renders as contestable one of the prized and time-honoured tropes of school leadership – the resolution of complex conflict by the unequivocal and decisive action of an individual. Thinking with paradox signals instead very different possibilities for how principals appropriate, manage and decide these conflicts.

The fourth theme works beyond the deployment of a paradox lens in understanding and critiquing the status quo. This theme shifts into more speculative possibilities for the use of paradox and to consideration of what Smith, Lewis, Jarzabkowski and Langley (2017) describe as its ‘generative potential’ (p. vi). Two possibilities are advanced in the context of applying the theoretical possibilities in paradox in future research in the field of critical leadership studies:

1. That the language of paradox can help narrate an oppositional politics. In ‘exploring the critical consequences that complexity holds’ (Woermann, 2016, p. 3), the relevance of thinking with paradox is here shifted to the constitutive possibilities in using the language of paradox to narrate the politics of opposition to the status quo. This function – later referred to as a ‘warrior topos’ quality (after Barthes, 1975) – proposes ambitious, but still relevant and transferrable possibilities in a paradox language that direct leaders away from reductive and simplified problem-solving logic and towards strategically challenging the current orthodoxy, troubling one-sided interpretations, seeking creative alternatives and keeping options open by delaying the rush to resolution.
2. That paradox creates opportunities for new learning. Schad, Lewis, Raisch and Smith (2016) allude to this quality when they observe that ‘paradoxes stare us in the face – taunting our established certainties, while tempting our untapped creativity’ (p. 6). A detailed case for *a pedagogy of paradox* is made in Chap. 9, with each of the multiple learning opportunities proposed being conditional on filling the prerequisite need for a ‘wonderer’ – an audience to paradox who admire and wonder about it and who are willing to share in and prolong its actions (Colie, 1966, p. 519).

The Grounding of Theory in Research: An Inductive Approach

Theoretical insights into the constitution of principals and their work advanced in this book did not start from imagining paradox as imbued with theoretical content. Nor were they mined straight from the extant literature or from the ‘threads’ of

post-structuralism (Woermann, 2016, p. 6). Rather, decisions about theory originated from empirical data drawn from fieldwork conducted in five secondary schools (*Appendix 1* is an anonymised list of the schools and research participants cited in this book). This data, and the various 'analytical insights and interpretive hunches' (Ball, 2012, p. viii) it provided, was subsequently put into an iterative relationship with key ideas related, for example, to the expanded epistemological possibilities in paradox, the use of the conceptual resources of Foucault and others and the imbrication of neoliberal policy discourses with the processes of principal subjectivity.

While this grounding of theory in research, or what Heffernan (2018) terms 'the-oring of the data' (p. 7), is not reflected directly in the order of chapters which follow, the inductive qualities of this process have a direct bearing on the breadth and depth of what unfolds. In much of the book, I have preferred expansive and imaginative possibilities over reductive and precise findings. The first-order insights used in this book from principals and other participants in my research are indicative of the diverse and often contradictory data collected and are chosen for their illustrative qualities rather than as evidence of a definitive truth. In treating paradox largely as an outside concept working its way into a new field of study, assertions about the significance of persistent tensions are not grandiose and unequivocal, but rather are advanced in a qualified and tentative ways. Throughout, I am looking to avoid definitive answers and, instead, to fill out themes, categories and ideas on which critically oriented scholarship might develop and from which further questioning might proceed.

Methodologically, the more expansive qualities of this book are influenced by the tenets of policy sociology (see Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992; Gale, 2001; Ozga, 1987) which bring together analysis of systems-level policy development and micro-level investigation of the perceptions and experiences of those implementing policy. A policy sociology approach supports my interest in understanding the social complexities of the policy work of principals and, more particularly, following Bowe et al. (1992), the portrayal and analysis of 'the processes of active interpretation and meaning-making' that principals undertake in order to 'relate policy texts to practice' (p. 13). Such positioning helps me work against one of the traditional polemics of sociology that separates macro-level interests in broader social structures from the micro-contexts of individuals and their practices. Instead, I endeavour to summon what Mills (1959) famously describes as 'the sociological imagination' which 'enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals' (p. 5).

An important conceptualisation that relies on these inductive and imaginative qualities is the formulating of principal subjectivity as a process of 'neoliberalisation' founded in the variations in the take-up of neoliberal policy in practice. This concept, which draws from the extant literature as well as accounts provided by principal participants in my research, opens critical spaces adjacent to a vast store of readings that treats the neoliberal political-economic project as dominant and ubiquitous. In revealing plurality and contingency, neoliberalisation suggests a more nuanced

analysis of the governing of principal conduct that, in turn, reveals and holds open its paradoxical qualities – the contradictions, conflicts and ambiguities that inhere within, and work constitutively on, the process of principal subject formation.

The data used and analysed in this book was collected using the ‘qualitative and illuminative techniques’ (Ozga, 1987, p. 144) of ethnographically informed field-work. The choice of this method – and the use of its traditional staples of extended observation, in situ interviews and document analysis in the field – supports the idea that there is value in understanding the ‘wholeness’ of the lives and work of principals through extended contact with individuals in their natural setting. I seek to utilise what Bray (2008) describes as an ‘intrinsically sensitive’ quality in ethnographic work that reveals the nuances, subtleties and complexities so important in understanding people, behaviours and culture (p. 300). This involves getting inside the ‘messy and ecological’ everyday practices of principals (Thomson, 2001, p. 16) to engage with the inherent complexities, to see the tensions and contradictions they invoke and, ultimately, to undertake some useful sense-making work to shed light on the constitutive forces at play.

The Sequence of Chapters

The following summary of chapters attempts a gradual prising open of the key ideas, arguments and aspirations of this book while also trying to depict, more sequentially, the ground to be covered and the plates to be kept spinning.

Chapter 2 is concerned with securing the theoretical content of paradox in order to enhance its possibilities as a tool of thought and to inform the use of a paradox lens in subsequent chapters. It explores the historical allocation of ‘epistemological’ (Colie, 1966) qualities to paradox and uses contemporary research, mostly from the fields of organisational and management studies, to explicate its componentry and its synergy with, and separation from, familial terms. The latter part of the chapter takes a post-structural turn, with the relationship between discourse, contradiction and paradox established through the work of Michel Foucault, with a segue then made to the political possibilities of a paradox lens in the work of Foucault and his contemporary, Roland Barthes.

Chapter 3 turns more fully to the application of Foucault’s theoretical resources. Foucault’s notion of the ‘soul’ is introduced as that part of the subject which is exposed to various techniques of power in the interests of government. This chapter makes a selective raid of Foucault’s vast catalogue in order to understand the extended and different impacts of power on the soul of the principal. More specifically, Foucault’s work is used to make the argument that the principal subject, in neoliberal times, is rendered as fully disposed to outside forces of government and to the self-fashioning of authority and practices inside of a compliant subjectivity. The locus of support is found in Foucault’s understanding of the arts of liberal government and, in particular, the emergence of a distinctly neoliberal form of governmentality. This central concept is linked to Foucault’s later work on tech-

nologies of the self in order to surface notions of principal freedom and introduce the prospect of a contest over principal subjectivity. Subsequent connections are made, at the nexus of governmentality and subjectivity, to explanatory themes of discourse, power/knowledge and truth.

The discourse analysis conducted at the beginning of [Chap. 4](#) works from Foucault's prescient genealogical accounts of the art of (neo)liberal government. It takes the policy discourses of neoliberalism as an object of analysis that help discern, from a sprawling and ambiguous field, the varied constitutive influences of neoliberal governmentality on the principal subject. The analysis of four policy discourses – *choice*, *excellence*, *entrepreneurship* and *managerialism* – is directed to revealing their problematisations and to critiquing the rationalities and power/knowledge arrangements that confer on them hegemonic qualities and subjectifying tendencies. In support of a processual understanding of neoliberalism, this analysis includes second-level critique at the margins of each discourse to open a critical space against dominant and ubiquitous readings. The aim is to reveal greater fragility and contingency as well as to reinstate alternative discourses that have been forgotten, subjugated or put aside.

[Chapter 5](#) introduces and elaborates key concepts and ideas to be applied in the 'paradox' chapters which follow (i.e. [Chaps. 6, 7 and 8](#)). The chapter commences by proposing the 'neoliberalisation' of the principal as a variegated and contingent process that suggests the availability of a variety of different subject positions. My claim of a struggle for the soul of the principal is then explicated and defended. I argue that principals should involve themselves in such a struggle and, subsequently, offer critique, counter-conduct and agonistic resistance as appropriate *struggle tactics*. The chapter concludes with a more detailed account of a paradox lens for looking at the constitutive forces shaping the lives and work of principals. This chapter also provides background to the use of principal 'portraits' in the chapters which follow.

Each of [Chaps. 6, 7 and 8](#) introduces a series of paradoxes derived from evidence collected in the field and supported, in aspects of their construction and componentry, by the theoretical work and discourse analyses that have gone before. The chapters are titled as follows:

- [Chapter 6](#): Paradoxes of Subjectivity and Authority
- [Chapter 7](#): Paradoxes of Neoliberal Policy
- [Chapter 8](#): Paradoxes of Managerialist Practice

While [Chaps. 6, 7 and 8](#) continue to make the case for paradoxical representation, they are primarily concerned with shedding further light on the political struggle for the soul of the principal. To this end, I take the conventional truths and knowledge claims contained in each of the paradoxes as rendering principals susceptible to the conducting forces of government and to invitations to shape themselves and their own conduct. Against these depictions, I test the capacity of the simultaneous and interrelated oppositions in paradox to reveal and illuminate a struggle for the soul of the principal and to inform the political work of discovering

and instating valid oppositions and fashioning the spaces of freedom where they can be enacted.

Chapter 9 draws conclusions from preceding work in the form of a number of generative possibilities for research in the field of critical leadership studies. Three broad areas of possibility are proposed. Firstly, *a pedagogy of paradox* is explicated as a schematic model to guide the researcher (as learner) in the application of paradox to existing conditions of conflict and struggle. The model is extended to show how paradox may yield expanded learning opportunities in the ‘critical engagement’ of the researcher with and beyond existing conditions. Secondly, *the process of principal neoliberalisation* is further explored in terms of the support it offers for different conceptualisations of the broader neoliberal project and, more specifically, for the constitutive possibilities held in the broader array of subject positions it appears to make available to principals. To conclude, following Foucault’s (1984) edict that ‘we always have something do’ (p. 343), generative possibilities aligned with principal practice are distilled from the notion of ‘negative capability’ (Keats, 2010) and from the future work suggested in Foucault’s (1982) ‘permanent provocation’ of the agonistic subject.

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