

Chapter 4

In Neoliberal Times



The ‘meteoric’ expansion of academic inquiry into neoliberalism (Springer, 2012, p.135) over the last two decades has undone scholarly consensus about its meanings and effects. Disagreements have emerged over the way the ‘academic growth concept’ (Flew, 2012, p. 44) of neoliberalism should be apprehended and about its power and pervasiveness across social fields such as education. To commence this chapter, I flag an a priori concern about neoliberalism’s burgeoning literature catalogue and the enormous breadth and depth of its contexts and applications and the contemporaneous disappearance of unifying structure or coherent meaning.

To bring a more coherent foundation to my analysis of the policy discourses of neoliberalism later in this chapter, I will look to clarify my positioning within these ambiguous contests while holding to my central interest in discerning the constitutive influence of neoliberalism on the subjectivities and work of principals. Towards addressing this concern for clarity, I will use, as a starting point, Foucault’s (2008) genealogical accounts of liberalism and the prescient understanding of neoliberalism they yield. Foucault’s work supports the comprehension of neoliberalism as a unique form of governmentality and usefully forecasts both the discourses through which it circulates and its processual qualities of variegation and contingency.

Comprehending Neoliberalism Using Foucault

In *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), Foucault provides a course of 12 lectures that build from his earlier work on a historical shift in governance from the disciplinary micro-control of individuals to that centred on the problem of population or bio-power (e.g. Foucault, 1978, 1991). He develops three separate genealogical accounts: (1) the eighteenth-century emergence of *liberalism* as an ‘art of government’; (2) German liberalism in the period 1948–1962, with a focus on the *Ordoliberalism* of the socially oriented Freiburg School; and (3) the *American neo-liberalism* of the Chicago school’s political economists in the middle period of the

twentieth century. Taken together, these genealogies, rather than being directly concerned with the emergence of biopolitics as a governmental apparatus (see Flew, 2012; Oksala, 2013), are occupied with connecting the art of government expressed in eighteenth-century liberalism with ‘currents of thought’ in more contemporary (neo)liberalisms that present ‘radical challenges to the system of the welfare state’ (Gordon, 1991, p. 41). While not claiming to be an exhaustive coverage, the following three categories of understanding are summarily discerned and shaped from Foucault’s genealogical insights and subsequently used to identify several of the policy discourses of neoliberalism in my analysis.¹

The Market as a ‘Site of Truth’

In outlining the novelty of liberalism in the eighteenth century, Foucault (2008) observes that liberal government is conducted to procure the prosperity of the population, and governmental actions are devised, not in terms of juridical considerations of right or wrong but in light of their possible effects – whether they will succeed or fail in the context of the market. Foucault (2008) contends that the market thus emerges in the eighteenth century as the ‘site of truth’ (p. 30) of liberal government. This respect for the logics of the market continues into his more contemporary accounts of German and American neoliberalism, albeit with a significant change in emphasis, as the ‘truth’ of the market becomes more enmeshed with interventions of the state and with the exercise of political power. In configuring the market as a form of truth, Foucault (2008) flags its pre-eminence as a mechanism of contemporary neoliberalism. He also opens to critique a market-driven approach to economic and social policy by posing questions – and addressing them through his German and American examples – about the capacity of a market economy to ‘serve as the principle, form, and model for a state’ and about ‘knowing how far the market economy’s powers of political and social information extend’ (Foucault, 2008, pp. 117–118).

In homing in on the new thinking of the ordoliberals of Germany’s Freiburg School, Foucault (2008) describes how their analysis of Nazism and its origins enabled rejection of the non-interventionist (or *laissez-faire*) principles of classical liberalism in favour of a fully functioning market based on principles of competition and regulation. He says that the ordoliberals propose ‘that we should completely turn the formula around and adopt the free market as an organizing and regulating principle of the state’ (p. 116). However, in this shift to economic rationalities, Foucault (2008) also notes that the ordoliberals judge competition as structurally rigorous but historically fragile and ‘not a given of nature’ (p. 120). Consequently, they make their case for state intervention and control of the conditions of

¹For a more comprehensive coverage of Foucault’s treatment and framing of neoliberalism, see Brown (2015), Chaps. 2 and 3.

possibility of economic processes. Foucault (2008) treats this meshing of the market with a ‘rules of the game’ (p. 173) state function as a crucial neoliberal insight provided by the ordoliberalists.

The second of Foucault’s contemporary studies shifts focus to the American neoliberalism of the Chicago School. Described in his 1979 lecture as a ‘pet theme’ in France, Foucault (2008) claims that the liberalism the school’s economists favoured is positioned against the interventionist state to formulate a version of liberalism, ‘not as a technical alternative for government’ but as ‘a whole way of being and thinking’ – ‘a general style of thought, analysis, and imagination’ (pp. 218–219). Referencing the libertarian work of Austrian economists Friedrich von Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, the Chicago School seeks utopian possibilities in a model of enterprise that appears as a natural process and ‘comes to encompass the whole sphere of subjectivity, affectivity, and intimacy’ (Wallenstein, 2013, p. 27).

A distinguishing feature of this ‘global claim’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 218) of American liberalism is the entry of entrepreneurial relations into the self, via the idea of ‘human capital’ (Wallenstein, 2013, p. 27). This ‘breakdown of labour into capital and income’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 224) takes ‘the body as genetic capital’ (Wallenstein, 2013, p. 27) and positions the worker as making choices between competing ends about how they develop their ‘human capital’, for example, by treating education as investment in order to maximise their wages. In this interpretation, Foucault (2008) notes that capital becomes ‘inseparable from the person who possesses it’ and, more particularly, in a ‘conception of capital-ability’, the individual is drawn to increasing their personal productivity by investing in themselves (pp. 224–225). In the context of contemporary studies of (neo)liberalism, and of making the individual a target of deliberate investment, Foucault’s (2008) revival of the notion of *homo œconomicus* (p. 225) becomes particularly pertinent.

Homo Œconomicus in the Enterprise Society

Having established that neoliberalism does not mark a return to the laissez-faire principles of classical liberalism, Foucault (2008) is concerned to describe a ‘style’ of government, a ‘way of doing’ (p. 133) government that adopts the principles of the market through its policy interventions. One manifestation of this new figuration of power is the resurrection of *homo œconomicus* or ‘economic man’, albeit somewhat transformed from the classic liberal conception of a partner of exchange left alone to fulfil her/his own needs. *Homo œconomicus*, emerging in an idealised form from the enterprising of social relations, now becomes an ‘eminently governable’ subject of interest (Foucault, 2008, p. 270) – a productive and agile individual, who is entrepreneur of her/himself and who is amenable to contributing to the power of governmental reason (or *raison d’Etat*) shaped according to the market and competition.

According to Foucault (2008), *homo œconomicus*, under conditions of neoliberal governmentality, is someone who accepts reality by the systematic pursuit of

‘rational conduct’, which he describes as ‘any conduct which is sensitive to modifications in the variables of the environment and which responds to this in a non-random way’ (p. 269). Thus, the subjectivity of *homo æconomicus* is pegged to the enterprise form. Individuation ensures the conditions of control over conduct, and the rationality of the market creates a willing acceptance of ‘the obligation to maximise one’s life as a kind of enterprise’ (Rose, O’Malley, & Valverde, 2006, p. 91). In this way, *homo æconomicus* becomes a depoliticised subject, imbued with her/his own desires and prone to egoistic choices – shaped to meet market demands but infinitely flexible in adjusting to inevitable shifts in the arts of neoliberal government.

An Interplay of Freedom and Security

Foucault (2008) claims that the enshrinement of freedom in liberal government in the eighteenth century was not based on a juridical framework that respected and defended the rights of the individuals but occurred ‘simply by the evidence of economic analysis which it knows has to be respected’ (p. 62). He interprets the production of freedom – for example, freedom of the market, freedom to buy and sell and freedom of property rights – as underpinning the rationality and calculation of liberal government, with the corollary to arousing and producing freedom being seen in the emergence and proliferation of security mechanisms that seek to limit its risks. Thus, the interplay of freedom and security also ‘entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats, etcetera’ (p. 64).

Foucault (2008) addresses the issue of freedom in a different tenor in his charting of the rise to prominence of neoliberalism in post-World War II Germany. He contends that the adherence of individuals to promises of economic freedom implies consent to those governmental decisions taken to guarantee the same freedom. In this way, he claims, economic freedom ‘is able to function as a siphon ... as a point of attraction for the formation of a political sovereignty’ (p. 83). Foucault’s analysis of this ‘economic game of freedom’ (p. 84) reveals the consolidation of a permanent political consensus about power and freedom, founded on a circuitry ‘going from the economic institution to the population’s overall adherence to its regime and system’ (p. 85).

These insights into freedom are prescient in the way they translate usefully into contemporary neoliberal settings, such as schools. For example, the corollary that freedom forms with control is revealed in the way the limited freedoms that are championed and bestowed by government are offset by various disciplinary technologies that maintain tight governmental control. The agreement over power and freedom that Foucault discerns in the circuitry between institution and population in post-World War II Germany provides a rationale, in present-day politics, for the various levels of compliance, comfort and seduction that are induced by a consensus between government and the governed. In schools this can be observed, for example, in the ready acceptance of conditional versions of self-government and

principal autonomy and in the general absence of less constrained acts of freedom, such as opposition, refusal and resistance.

Like his earlier writings about madness, disease, delinquency and sexuality, Foucault's (2008) genealogies of liberalism and neoliberalism – including his insights into the market, freedom, *homo aeconomicus* and enterprise society – are premised on the non-existence of universals, so that they are, instead, concerned with 'how the coupling of a set of practices and a regime of truth form an apparatus (or dispositif) of knowledge-power that effectively marks out in reality that which does not exist and legitimately submits it to the division between true and false' (p. 19).

The dispositif, while 'resolutely heterogeneous' in its componentry (Foucault, 1994, p. 299), can also be understood as working towards an 'exhaustive ordering of the world' (Foucault, 1970, p. 74) and, in neoliberal times, enacting a particular rationality. What might be termed the 'policy dispositif' of neoliberalism (e.g. in Bailey, 2013) is particularly pertinent to my focus on principal subjectivity in the analysis of policy discourses which follows. This dispositif is interpreted by Rose et al. (2006) as shaping 'a novel periodization of governmentalities' (p. 91) that, in turn, brings the calculative management of principal conduct 'to the space of bodies, lives, selves and persons' (Dean, 2010, p. 12).

Neoliberal Policy Discourses

The Analytic Terrain

In the discourse analysis which follows, neoliberalism is conceptualised as a form of governmentality, drawing it close to what Giroux (2008) calls 'a political project of governing and persuasion' (p. 1). Accordingly, it is not taken as producing specific outcomes in principal subjects but, rather, following Walkerdine and Bansel (2010), as providing 'the terrain through which the changes around the organisation of work and self are governed' (pp. 505–506). In this reading, neoliberalism is a discursively constituted mentality of government made operational by the 'mutable, inconsistent, and variegated process that circulates through the discourses it constructs, justifies, and defends' (Springer, 2012, p. 135). More forensically, neoliberalism is understood to validate the various statements that confer an appearance of truth on certain discourses (and undermine and disqualify the truth claims of others). These regimes of truth are here configured as the policy discourses of choice, excellence, entrepreneurship and managerialism. Before bringing these discourses into sharper focus, I will first clarify some of my category and nomenclature choices and outline the process of discourse analysis used.

The choice of *policy discourses* as the object and unit of analysis is, initially, to capture a broad definition of policy that includes the centrally developed documents, directives and codified instructions that flow into schools (and the problems

to which they respond) as well as the complex processes that shape the school-based settlement, translation and enactment of policy. Subsequently, working at the level of policy discourses admits analysis of both the constraints and demands placed on principals by policy texts. For example, it accommodates an interest in the interpretive responses of principals to questions of meaning and local relevance and attends to school-based practices that principals undertake as receivers and advocates of policy and as agents in its implementation.

The grammar of *policy subjects* and *policy actors* is applied to particular subject/actor positions formed when principals become the object of political and governmental activity because, as Gobby (2017) notes, ‘the position they hold in schools makes them mediators and translators of government policy’ (p. 86). The key term *policy subjects* is used to evoke the work of principal subjectivation – especially as it is imposed inside the symbolic order of neoliberal policy discourses by the ‘taken-for-granted and implicit knowledges and assumptions’ (Bailey, 2013, p. 814) and the ‘network of social practices ... infused with power relations’ (Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011b, p. 611). *Policy subjects* is also used to suggest that new subject positions might emerge when principals locate themselves in ‘outside’ fields and think differently about how policy discourses shape them.

Continuing to draw from the work of Ball, Maguire, Braun and Hoskins (2011a), the designation of *policy actors* shifts attention from discourse to practice by paying regard to the ‘complex and differentiated activity’ of principals in shaping ‘the “responses” of schools *to* and their work *with* policy’ (p. 625, italics in original). In relation to outside pressures to audit, appraise and adjudge these responses, it includes the work of principals in communicating the best possible performance of themselves and their school as a measure of productivity, authority and worth. The term *policy actor* also invokes the ‘complex conditions of possibility’ (Walkerdine & Bansel, 2010, p. 506) in principal performance when extra-local and local variations create differently mediated contests over policy.

I do not use the terms *policy subject* and *policy actor* pejoratively or to imply that principals are policy dupes working at the behest of central bosses. Rather, I seek in their analytical possibilities ways of revealing a more productive understanding of principal subjectivity – one that takes account of the complex relationship that Bernstein (1996) describes between the ‘official’ field ‘created and dominated by the state’ and the ‘pedagogic field’ occupied by ‘pedagogues in schools’ (p. 48) and which understands principal subjectivity as an uneven *process* of ‘neoliberalisation’² rather than as a complete subjugation to irresistible forces of domination.

²The process of ‘neoliberalisation’ as it might be applied to principal subjectivity is given more detailed treatment at the beginning of Chap. 5.

A Grid of Analysis

My analysis of the discourses of choice, excellence, entrepreneurship and managerialism – what I term *the policy discourses of neoliberalism* – brings Foucault's (2008) understanding of the liberal arts of government and, in particular, his account of neoliberal governmentality, to an archive which includes broad themes distilled from data collected in the field as well as a significant body of extant literature and policy texts. I seek answers to 'why?' and 'how come?' questions about the power of policy discourses as they circulate through principals within different networks of relations and the subjectifying and constitutive influences they exert on their ways of being and working. In accordance with Tamboukou's (2003) assertion that the point of analysis of discourse is to focus attention on particular 'regimes of truth' that 'may elude the knowledge terrain of the ethnographer' (p. 211), I also seek to emphasise macro-level influences, often beyond and outside of local perspectives collected in the field.

In conducting this analysis, I reaffirm and consolidate my commitment to drawing from Foucault's theoretical and conceptual catalogue. While Foucault provides extensive and valuable insights into discourse formation and effects, he is, over his entire oeuvre, somewhat arcane about the actual method for doing discourse research (see Graham, 2011; Jackson & Mazzei, 2011; Keller, 2005). Therefore, in analysing the policy discourses of neoliberalism, I do not follow the distinct characteristics and patterns of Foucault's archaeologies or genealogies. Rather, I take his offer to extract 'tools' and 'gadgets' from his books and from the methods he used (e.g. in Foucault, 1980b, p. 65), as allowing in my own 'categories' of analysis.

Based on Foucault's (1972) assertion that discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (p. 54), I focus my analysis on the power relations that find their 'epistemic context' (Rouse, 2006, p. 96) as they are imbricated with the specific knowledges (i.e. 'discourses') of neoliberal policy. From this theoretical backdrop, I follow Foucault's (1980a) instruction that the researcher needs 'a grid of analysis which makes possible an analytic of relations of power' (p. 199). My own grid draws on a number of sources, most significantly the components of a method outlined by Howarth (2010) as well as methodological insights from the work of Keller (2005, 2011), Bacchi (2009) and Webb (2014). Schematically, my 'grid' can be distilled into four categories:

- (i) *Problematising policy discourses: turning a given into a question.* To animate the gap between the macro interests of policy-making and the micro concerns of local school principals, I consider the problem-making work of the policy discourses. Foucault's distinct genealogical concept of 'problematization' is used to seek, 'on the very surface of discourse' (Foucault, 1996, p. 58), the formulation of a problem to which policy offers a particular and favoured solution. This 'development of a given into a question' (Foucault, 2002, p. 118) supports me to look away from 'the pervasive logic that maintains educational *problems* can be *solved* in, with, or through policy' (Webb, 2014, p. 364, italics in original) to instead think about the representation of 'problems' within each discourse and

how and why these representations have come about. I also look to join the hegemonic tendencies of neoliberal policy discourses with the naturalisation of their problem-solving possibilities and the concealment of their political power.

In applying this form of questioning directly to my research question, my interests follow those of Diem, Young, Welton, Mansfield, and Lee (2014) in finding out ‘how nebulous concepts become reality’ and ‘how ideas become normalized’ (p. 1076). I focus on how problematisations create conditions of intelligibility within which ‘already known’ (Foucault, 1978, p. 9) versions of principals and their policy work emerge. I work with qualitative insights gathered in the field to show how principals are cast as a specific category of policy actor, assumed to understand the purposes and intent of policy and charged with transmission of its meaning into schools. I also note the ways in which principals, within this intelligible space, are taken to be ambivalent about the political conditions of policy formation and unconcerned about its ‘rational posturings’ (Webb, 2014, p. 366). My grid of analysis, thus, widens to include the application of what Flynn (2006) calls the ‘socially sanctioned body of rules’ (p. 31) to the way spaces for principals’ thoughts, judgements and actions are specified and confined.

(ii) *Uncovering logics: governing of discursive frontiers and boundaries.* In policy analysis, Ball (2006) claims that we must be concerned not only with what ‘those who inhabit policy think about’ but also to attend to what actors do not think about (p. 48). I use Ball’s observation to affect a shift in my analysis away from reliance on data derived from self-interpretation of principals and their colleagues and towards uncovering the social, institutional and political ‘logics’ (Howarth, 2010, p. 325) of discourses. This second category of analysis is directed to identifying the logics – the rules and conditions of possibility – that enable discourses to govern meaningful practice through the production of particular and intelligible truths. While more partial and speculative than other categories, this shift helps me determine the limits placed on what principals think and do and, by extension, what is left unthought and undone. Further, using Howarth (2010), it asks how power elaborates ‘political frontiers’ and draws ‘lines of exclusion and inclusion’ through logics of hidden contingency and naturalised domination and the extent to which such logics work to create principal subjects who ‘are gripped by discourses’ (p. 326).

In this category, I use a governmentality perspective to reveal the logics that underpin a reconfigured relationship between the governing and the governed in neoliberal times. I conceptualise the principal subject as vulnerable to the technologies of government that operate through both formal and everyday channels and are constituted, influenced and directed by a heterogeneous assemblage (or *dispositif*) of discursive and non-discursive forces. Under conditions of neoliberal governmentality, these arrangements are interpreted as both disciplining the principal through institutionally sanctioned rationalities and technologies and inducing levels of self-government and volunteered ‘enjoyment’ procured by principals ‘in identifying with discourses and believing things they do’ (Howarth, 2010, p. 326).

- (iii) *Providing critical explanation: thinking with power/knowledge.* This third category of analysis involves a shift to a critique of the intelligible background against which principals and their work are constituted. I apply Howarth's (2010) process of 'critical explanation' to work back and forth between a central proposition about the constitutive work of policy discourses of neoliberalism and my empirical data. In keeping with Foucault's (1997) claim that critique should start by identifying 'connections between mechanisms of coercion and contents of knowledge' (p. 59), I propose that the specific knowledges contained in the operations of discourses of neoliberal policy are inextricably linked with particular relations of power. I contend that discourse gives this power its epistemic context while simultaneously depending on this power for its production and standing.

This proposition, as a contextual reworking of what Foucault (1977) describes as 'power-knowledge relations' (discussed in detail in Chap. 3), allows me to connect my empirical data to thinking about how power routinely draws upon and mobilises particular notions of the principal that are housed in the knowledge generated in discourses and their practices. Critical explanation, therefore, takes account of both the outside constitution of principal subjects in the image of dominant discourses and the discursive conditions within which principals secure their authority and identity. I consider how the attachment of dominant discourses to power, derived from the truth claims they make, creates pressures and desires amongst principals to speak 'inside' these discourses. Against this interpretation, I also begin to contemplate possibilities for refusal, contestation and resistance held in the multiple claims on the truth made by different discourses.

- (iv) *Critique at the limits of discourse: asking questions of truth and power.* In this fourth category of analysis, critique shifts from 'an outward directed narrative' explaining the potent claims to truth in power/knowledge pairings to inside questions about the discursive limits of power and truth and deliberations on what Foucault (1997) describes as 'the art of not being governed like that and at that cost' (p. 45). Discursive practices, previously taken as shrewd, shrouded and seductive in holding principals firmly in their grip, are here critiqued at their limits in order to not only reveal their inadequacies and fragilities but also to render as visible and speakable a range of other discourses and their practices.

In expediting this critique at the limits of discourse, I extend the conceptual reach of problematisation to thinking about neoliberal policy discourses as transitory and contingent and, following Bacchi (2009), ask how they could be 'questioned, disrupted and replaced' (p. 19). This means taking account of Foucault's (2000) conception of problematisation as a 'movement of critical analysis' that includes 'any new solution which might be added to others' (pp. 118–119). More tangible targets for this work of disruption, fragmentation and discontinuity are also sought in Foucault's (1997) reference to 'governmentalization' as the 'movement through

which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth' (p. 47).

To further this critical ambition and reveal spaces of 'multiple dissensions' (Foucault, 1972, p. 155), the concept of governmentality is applied to references in my data to governmental shaping of principal subjectivity that could be construed as interruptive or unorthodox – that appear to speak back to power. My analytical work shifts to the thoughts that exist 'both beyond and before systems and edifices of discourse' (Foucault, 2002, p. 456) and which are given expression in the nuance and complexity of principal responses to the way they are governed and the way they govern themselves and others.

In rounding off this summary of my grid for analysing policy discourses of neoliberalism, it is worth noting how it fits inside this book's paradox frame. While paradox may appear something of an interloper into Foucault's vast and theoretically rich oeuvre, I claim a certain complementarity in the relationship. The positive settlement of my calculations of the methodological salience of Foucault's theoretical work is significantly aided by linking of Foucault's consistent interest in the conflicts, provocations and contests that characterise the operations of discourse, with the possibility that a paradox lens may shed further light on these discursive struggles. Beyond simple representation of complexity, conflict and ambiguity, I reason that a paradox lens can complement Foucault's theoretical interpretations of struggle within and against policy discourses by opening different ways of thinking, talking and understanding. The enhanced possibilities for interpretation created by 'looking' through a paradox lens are discussed in the conclusion to the next chapter and, subsequently, realised in the chapters that follow (i.e. Chaps. 6, 7 and 8).

The Choice Discourse

As a discourse of neoliberal policy, choice draws upon and intensifies the established logic that parents and students, as consumers of schooling, should be free to choose the school they think is best for them. Buras and Apple (2005) add a corollary to this logic founded on the assumption that schools work better when they 'are motivated and disciplined by market forces' (p. 551). The discourse of choice presupposes a standardised and apolitical field of judgement that all consumers are equally free to access. Regularity of this field is assured by the production of a competitive environment in which all schools must develop and continuously improve their educational 'product' in ways that attract the best possible share of parents and students. As Dardot and Laval (2014) note, of 'the operations of competition' under neoliberal conditions, '(i)t is no longer a question of postulating a spontaneous agreement between individual interests, but of creating the optimal conditions for the interplay of their rivalry' (p. 47).

Implicit in these opening comments is a governmental preference for choice that rests on a particular construction of the schooling 'problem'. This problematisation posits choice as a solution to perceived underachievement, lack of initiative,

complacency and ambivalence in many schools. Drawing from a range of critically oriented texts, the answers to these problems are considered to reside in the ways choice, marketisation and competition purportedly engender greater efficiency (Springer, 2012, p. 136), compel schools to be more responsive to the community (Buras & Apple, 2005, p. 556), raise standards and strengthen accountabilities (Lingard, 2010, p. 132) and promote an enterprising approach by anticipating and satisfying the expectations of education consumers (Angus, 2015, p. 396).

Neoliberal values of deregulation, consumer primacy and competition contribute to making choice into a unified discursive formation. These values create the important precept that there is nothing political about school choosing. As Angus (2015) notes, school choice is constructed as:

just atomized, self-interested, rational choosers dispassionately acting to maximize their individual advantage in ways that are ostensibly equally open to all right-thinking and conscientious people. (p. 404)

However, the full enunciation of the policy discourse of choice is not left only to the rationality of the market. It also includes the simultaneous presence of a dispositive of texts, institutions and regulations that both legitimate freedom of choice as a priority of government and activate a range of technologies that police its discursive boundaries and quell its contradictions. This mix of the discursive and non-discursive provides the key to understanding the constitutive influence of the choice discourse on principals.

The choice discourse not only assures parent and student participation in the school marketplace but also describes, for principals, a particular form of self-government based on their ability to transform market potential to actual competitive performance. To this end, the choice discourse casts principals as autonomous agents, free to develop and improve their competitive selves and to get the best out of others and their school. The themes of development, improvement and ‘competing to be chosen’ (Angus, 2015, p. 396) are evident in the description Imogen, the principal of McCullough School, provides:

When I came to the school, I was informed of what the projected numbers would be. We’re above that ... we’re maintaining. That’s encouraging. My boss has informed me many times that he hears within the community that our school is the desirable school of choice. I’m hearing that from the principals in my local partnership as well that the image of the school is changing, but we still have a long way to go.

While imploring others to contribute, principals must also accept as fundamental tenets of neoliberal governmentality their individualisation as designated leaders and as self-governing agents of policy and, drawing on Savage (2013), their responsabilisation as ‘*active producers* of their own market identities and practices’ (p. 85, italics in original). Their participation involves greater personal risk and accountability as a centralised policy of choice is devolved to their empowered and self-disciplined selves. However, this is not to suggest that principals are unwilling to embrace competition or reluctant to occupy a subjectivity founded, at least in part, on successful participation in the school marketplace. The following exchange

reveals Imogen's enthusiasm for working on a marketing plan at her school inside the policy discourse of choice:

Imogen: We haven't actively gone out and promoted ourselves as well as we could, but next year there is a very different plan on how we can do that.

Chris: Is this a marketing plan?

Imogen: Oh, definitely ... We've already started it. I have a publicity person. We put out a part-time position for a promotions person. He is now working with a website company to rebuild our website. We've rebadged ourselves in the last three years, so new logo and a whole lot of material as well. He's now aligning all of that material together. He's also an amazing photographer, so there's going to be a photo-shoot. If you walk around the school, there are photos everywhere.

To account for the hold of the choice discourse on the principal subject requires further analysis of the logics – the rules and conditions of possibility – that enable the discourse to govern meaningful practice. The interpretation that schooling exists in a 'quasi-market' refers to the requirement that the school marketplace needs to be constructed by government in order to operate effectively (Webb, Gulson, & Pitton, 2014, p. 33). Accordingly, one of the important logics of the choice discourse is that schools – and principals – do not deal in a free-market environment but, rather, are expected to willingly submit to various inducements, conditions and accountabilities, imposed by the state through its legislation, policy and funding arrangements. Here, an understanding of the school market as mediated, controlled and manipulated by government connects to various technologies that impose obvious and necessary qualities on the choice discourse. At the nexus of the specific knowledges the discourse produces, and the particular relations of power in which it is enmeshed, I locate two technologies evident in my field data – competition and impression management.

Competition is central to the mercantile policy interests of contemporary government. For the schools in my study, it appeared to operate on the discursive practices that seek to naturalise and embed competition between schools, as well as providing a rationale for the broader dispositif of policies, techniques and instructions that promote and sustain it. In my ethnographic fieldwork, the most obvious indicator of the operations of competition in schools was a widespread concern, expressed in interviews with principals and others, about maintaining and increasing their school's enrolment share. For example:

So with the governing council in the last few years, there's been a big focus on the image of the school, and we want to attract – we as in the governing council and the principal – we want to attract more enrolments. We want to keep the school chugging along, growing ... That means then that the principal, the school community, everyone has the responsibility to show what a good school it is and why people would want to come here. (Leah, Governing Council member, McCullough School)

Other comments make clear the local objectives of competition between schools for student enrolments:

We're still a business in terms of if we don't get students because of poor performance, then staff numbers decrease, which could lead to the eventual closing of the school. It's happened with other schools. (John, McCullough School)

The reality is if you don't get the numbers, you don't stay open. I've been in a school where the bottom line was that the school's results there were not good enough and the staff was reduced by 17, I mean 17 displacements in a single year. (Oman, McCullough School)

Interpreting successful competition for enrolments as important to the survival and viability of the school positions the principal as a key influence. This is evident in the following interview exchange at Caldicott School:

Chris: *What are some other measures that we might use for principal effectiveness?*

Jay: *Enrolment data. I know that over the years, particularly here, to start with our numbers were lower. Now we're at a point where we virtually only take students that are in zone because we can't fit them.*

Calvin: *We have a massive waiting list for those out of zone.*

Jay: *We used to have five classes at year eight, then it went to six, this year it's gone to seven. There are people coming in, and feedback from parents, and that is the word is out that this is a good place to be. That is a really positive and good example, I think, that the school is being led in a good direction.*

Taken collectively, these local observations of competition made operational in schools through the quest for enrolments point to a more-or-less unproblematic embrace of the choice discourse and to perceptions of a marketised school environment as positive, natural and inevitable. They also suggest that the principal is conferred some rights by the discourse and draws some authority from speaking within it. While the tenor of these observations is distinctly local, locating the technology of competition in a broader dispositif of governmental strategies, tactics and disciplinary measures speaks more directly of the macro-level practices and their power effects on principals and schools. These practices typically construe choice as an educational investment (see Webb et al., 2014) with competition mediated through student achievement and other data sets in order to better inform the economic decision-making of parents. Under the guise of more open and transparent competition, this data is transformed into metrics via systems of classification, comparison and ranking, most notably, in the Australian context, through the national implementation of the *MySchool* website (2013) run by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

The homepage of *MySchool* locates the website squarely within the neoliberal policy discourse of choice. It describes a resource for parents, educators and the community that 'enables fair comparisons' between schools and that helps parents 'make informed decisions about their child's education' while aiming to support and drive improvement across the nation. In producing and disseminating knowledge about schools, especially about levels of student achievement in high-stakes NAPLAN testing and comparisons of individual school performance in these tests

against 60 statistically similar schools, *MySchool* confers power and legitimacy on the choice discourse. At the same time, it is the power of this discourse that legitimises this form of ‘technical infrastructure’ (Lingard & Sellar, 2013, p. 637) as a productive tool of competition and comparison. This regime of power/knowledge works to fix and institutionalise the choice discourse and, within it, the subject positions available to principals. The effect on principals is evident in the following exchange in an interview at Heatherbank School:

Chris: Are they [principals] bound to show that in relation to the school down the road, they’re doing a better job?

Angela: It’s a bit of a competition, isn’t it?

Chris: Is it?

Angela: Well it seems to me it is. They now have a website where they put information about schools, one against the other. I suppose principals must feel pressure that my school needs to perform or we’re going to look bad against other people.

MySchool, along with comparisons made available through the *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*, serves as an example of using reductionist measures of school and system performance to foster competition and make comparisons. The powerful disciplinary influence of such measures and the persistence of their efforts to fix schools in a success/failure binary and to commodify educational practice are likely obscured from principals (and teachers) by a blind faith in the logics of the market and a determination to eschew ‘any sense of being ordinary’ (Maguire, Perryman, Ball, & Braun, 2011, p. 2). The effect of this individuating and commodifying work of competition is to have responsibility for student performance sheeted home to individual schools (and their teachers and principals), further accentuating differences between rich and poor schools while obscuring the socio-economic disparity at the heart of those differences.

In what Maguire, Perryman, et al. (2011) call the ‘manoeuvre against being regarded as ordinary’ (p. 5), schools are bound to create representations of themselves that show them in the best light and which distinguish them as a school of choice in the local (and often extended) marketplace. This results in the technology of impression management being deployed in competitive schools, and by enterprising principals, to conjure unique qualities and create favourable comparisons. Oman, from McCullough School, captures part of this work of impression management:

We have an image consultant at the moment. That’s symptomatic of the fact that schools have to function as businesses. To that end we’ve been running business management courses where we’ve been talking about the way we dress, the way we approach people, how we answer emails, all that sort of stuff.

Rob, principal at Heatherbank School, provides an insight into the taken-for-granted involvement of principals in impression management:

I'm sure all of us would say, 'Hey, we're all about promoting our school and the image of our school and we're all about keeping our school afloat'. So, we're all about our enrolments, and when you are talking about enrolments, it does come back to how you present the school and its image and its values and all of that stuff. That is part and parcel of our job.

In my research, the work of principals in managing the impression their school creates was observed in an array of overt and more subtle forms. One obvious example, variously expressed in each of the schools, was the linking of school uniform to community perceptions of the quality of the school and its student. Observations of uniformed mannequins in the front office, school newsletter directives about appropriate uniform and lengthy staff and governing council meeting discussions about the minutiae of uniform management, all underscored the importance attached to impressionable ways of presenting students positively in the community. In a strategy closer to what Foucault (1977) describes as 'dressage',³ Imogen described how her efforts to improve the standard of dress at McCullough School extended to the dress code of staff:

I made a statement at the beginning of the year that I wanted staff to actually change their dress, their attire and I didn't want staff to wear jeans. I said I felt that it was really important for staff to dress appropriately and that we needed to model behaviour and expectations with students. The change was immediate. I couldn't believe it. It's the power of just the principal saying something.

From recorded observations in my ethnography, impression management strategies also extended to sophisticated advertising campaigns, new road-facing signage, displays of various awards and trophies, design-rich websites and print publications and large format photographic displays. Several principals acknowledged the increased time and importance now attached to their impression management work and to accessing new expertise and resources from beyond the school. While these observations may add the metaphor of 'marketing manager' to a popular 'jack-of-all-trades' depiction of principal's work, they do not fully account for the transformative impact of this technology on principals.

Imogen provides another example of her impression management work at McCullough School:

I cannot get over the difference that just doing the front office has made and the front of the school, even in the data from our parent community. They now consider that we are a very attractive school and we have amazing facilities. Of course, we don't necessarily have them everywhere. It's just on the surface we've done a few things.

While apparently benign in its effects, this example introduces the idea that impression management can involve a level of exaggeration and deception. Drawing from the work of Ball (2001) and Maguire, Perryman, et al. (2011), I contend that impression management, as a technology supporting the rationality of school choice, implicates principals (and others) in creating a particular and, arguably,

³Foucault (1977) uses the term 'dressage' in reference to 'a technique of training' that regulates behaviour and ensures obedience (p. 166).

fabricated version of their school in order to look better than other local competitors. Maguire, Perryman, et al. (2011) claim that the ‘capacity to “manufacture” and positively “spin” the performance of a school [to fabricate] is all part of the contemporary demands being made of the modern school leader’ (p. 5). This claim is enriched by Ball’s (2001) portrayal of fabrication as the purposeful creation of versions of an organisation that does not exist – versions that are judged not for their truthfulness but for their effectiveness in the market and which work ‘on’ and ‘in’ the organisation in transformative ways (p. 216).

Finally, drawing impression management closer to my interest in the constitution of principals as policy subjects, I contend that principals are involved, often by necessity, in the work of managing impressions of themselves – work that is also inclined to deception and fabrication. The work of managing impressions of the self is further explored in [Chap. 7](#) in discussions of *the paradox of principal autonomy* and *the paradox of professionalism*.

I will now test the possibilities in critique and (re)problematism for interrupting ‘the unqualified celebration of “choice” in schooling’ (Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, & Murillo, 2002, p. 6). This necessitates a shift in my analysis to the margins of the choice discourse in search of what Butler (2004) terms ‘a certain incoherence’ or even ‘entire realms of unspeakability’ (p. 308) in the discursive ordering of the social setting of schools and of the subjectivity of principals.

The rhetoric of choice positions parents and students as consumers of schooling and implies that all parents have equal access to information and are politically savvy and capable of securing the best available education on behalf of their children. However, when this rhetoric is juxtaposed with the choices available to parents and students who are on its receiving end, a more uneven and inequitable picture emerges. The policy discourse of choice is revealed as obscuring and even exacerbating the limitations on school choice available in less-privileged communities. As Angus (2015) notes, ‘the competition is stacked’ so that the groups who generally benefit from choice are the already relatively advantaged ‘who are competing on a much more comfortable and familiar terrain’ (p. 410).

Much of my ethnographic data was collected in schools in less privileged communities. However, it contained few observations about the impositions and limitations that prevent parents from ranging beyond their local neighbourhood in search of a ‘good’ or ‘better’ school or of the residualisation of their own schools brought on by those who have chosen to move away. Rather, these ideas could only be gleaned from a more overtly expressed interest of principals in being the school of choice in a limited, and in some places shrinking, market. Principals appeared to regard as futile the critique of school choice policies weighted against them and their communities. They chose, instead, to make an enterprising commitment to optimising the participation of their school in the marketplace and to gaining and retaining the best possible share of students.

However, at the edge of this choice discourse, I share with Angus (2015) a suspicion that schools serving disadvantaged students ‘are unlikely to achieve much by simply trying to compete in neoliberal terms’ (p. 410). Not only does the neoliberal imaginary of market competition promoting greater accountability to parents and

students not coincide with the evidence (see Buras & Apple, 2005), but it also plays to parental notions and aspirations about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ schools in ways that entrench current inequities. As Zipin, Sellar, and Hattam (2012) observe, ‘when pursuing a future defined in relation to the axioms of capital, those with less access to social, cultural or economic resources must aspire in competition with those who have greater access’ (p. 187).

The incoherence and unspeakability at the margins of this discourse are, therefore, found in an aspiration for choice that is more likely thwarted and turned to ‘a largely illusory concept’ (McKay & Garratt, 2013, p. 742) for those with fewer resources. This critique suggests a re-problematisation of the choice discourse that shifts away from, and makes fragile, solutions bound up in neoliberal market logic. In the literature, alternatives are proffered for the classroom that develop the radical potential of ‘local funds of knowledge’ (Angus, 2012, p. 239) and ‘foreground pedagogies that inhere *in* students’ lifeworlds’ (Hattam & Zipin, 2009, p. 299, italics in original). Opposition to ‘exclusionary and undemocratic neoliberal policies’ is mounted through local, context-sensitive learning programmes (Smyth & McInerney, 2012, p. 57), and ideas for practice are promoted that reclaim the social justice purposes of schooling and ‘more progressive, educational and democratic purposes’ for accountability (Thomson, Lingard, & Wrigley, 2012, p. 3).

Adding the modest contributions of my analysis of school choice to the alternatives proposed by others is mediated by the formidable opposition of a discourse that seeks ‘to pathologise alternative modes of conduct that deviate from the norm’ (McKay & Garratt, 2013, p. 742). As a result, principal-participants in my research generally appeared to be drawn to positions that obey the policy logics of choice, competition and the market, rather than those outside of them. Perhaps the clearest insight into principal’s efforts to deviate towards responsive local practices is contained in various portraits of principal-participants in Chaps. 6, 7 and 8. While each depicts a type of macro-discursive shaping, they also highlight the school-based efforts of these principals to create locally relevant program and learning opportunities and to privilege, beyond a priority of ‘competing to be chosen’, the needs of the existing student cohort.

Several other neoliberal policy discourses intersect with the choice discourse. The performative aspiration for excellence is one of the prominent points of articulation and convergence. It is to ‘excellence’, formulated as a policy discourse of neoliberalism, that I now turn my attention.

The Excellence Discourse

References to excellence are marbled through my ethnographic data. In school documents, the term was variously noted as one in a set of school values, in the professional development plans of principals and teachers and in descriptions of schools’ missions, goals and strategic directions. It was observed in outside and front-office signage and in publicity and communications directed to parents and the

community. In interviews, ‘excellence’ was used in descriptions of student achievement, teaching and learning, school standards and facilities and infrastructure, with principals most commonly linking it to aspirations for school improvement and to impute a desired school reputation.⁴

The contemporary prominence of the rhetoric of excellence has its roots, according to Peter (2018), in the twinning of notions about ‘striving for excellence’ and ‘everyone can do it’ in the mid-twentieth century. He claims that this created a broad-based conception of excellence, extending from ‘top performance’ to the ability to awaken excellence in others, and formed numerous focal points for policy-making by the state (pp. 37–38). In neoliberal times, the discourse of excellence remains prominent but is now coordinated by the market on behalf of the state. ‘Unmistakably shaped by the semantics of neoliberalism’ (Peter, 2018, p. 38), striving for excellence is now transformed from an egalitarian value of the masses to the responsibility of self-governing individuals as they harness their personal creativity and enterprise in pursuit of economic success.

As a policy discourse of neoliberalism, excellence responds to perceptions of a school-based workforce that is accepting of underachievement and mediocrity and where the entrepreneurial qualities of the individual have been driven out by ‘bureaucratisation’ and ‘rigid hierarchies’ (Peter, 2018, p. 39). This problematisation is supported by the managerial creep of corporate discourses and the seductive and incontestable qualities they lend the term excellence. Like the summoning of ‘best practice’ and calls for ‘continuous improvement’, the inarguable character of ‘excellence’ allows it to unproblematically preface almost any aspect of schooling.

While this problematisation broadens the semantic space for excellence, it leaves it open to allegations of being a ‘hollow signifier’ (Higgins, 2011, p. 452) and what Smyth and Shacklock (2003) describe as one of those ‘educational aerosol words’ that is sprayed around as the latest bouquet (p 21). In its rhetorical deployment, it may indicate high achievement or grand aspirations; however, using it like this fails to measure and quantify excellence in a way that lends it the particular truth status and constitutive power of a discourse. Under ‘steering at a distance’ requirements of neoliberal governmentality, this power is needed to form a set of instrumental logics – the rules and conditions of possibility – that enable the prevailing discourse to govern meaningful practice through its claims to truth and its assumption of a natural and taken-for-granted status.

In the realm of schooling, the excellence discourse appropriates this rationality, most conspicuously, from measures of student learning outcomes that underpin the policy logics and research claims of the school effectiveness movement. This research movement was founded on, and to a large extent continues to hold as its central tenet, the capacity of schools to deploy a set of agreed inputs to gain a positive difference to the outcomes of students. Here the emphasis is on bracketing out nonschool factors and adjudging the extent to which schools can add value to students’ abilities – the so-called school effect (see Townsend, 2007). School

⁴For purposes on anonymity, I have not cited or fully expanded these references.

effectiveness proponent David Reynolds (1998) acknowledges the political orientation of the effectiveness movement when he notes that ‘school effectiveness has sung the policy makers tune in its emphasis on how schools can make a difference – indeed we wrote their words’ (p. 20).

If this quantifiable school effect is taken at the level of ‘statement’ in Foucault’s (1972) archaeological method, it can be considered as working inside of the neoliberal policy discourse of excellence and, by extension, helping enunciate what principals and others must treat as urgent and important. These connections appear to be in play in comments that Rob, principal at Heatherbank School, makes about central office concerns with student achievement data:

The system is concerned about NAPLAN results. So the system will set up through its strategic directions a focus on literacy, or as is happening now, a focus on numeracy. There is an expectation that the principals of schools will enact policies or put procedures in place that will endeavour to lift the standards in literacy or in numeracy.

Similarly themed observations can be gleaned from the provocation discussion amongst principal participants (see *Appendix 2*). Sasha, from Sullivan School, links data from high-stakes tests to its political function in supporting government policy objectives of choice and competition, while Janet, from Caldicott School, adds that it is only the data from these tests that holds value in outside judgements of her school. On the imposition on schools of central office requirements for student achievement data, Belinda, from Lawson School, claims ‘you have to do it and I do believe we all have to be accountable for that’.

Such accounts describe the involvement of principals and schools in a policy preoccupation ‘with an empiricism that fetishises numbers’ and a concomitant insistence that the measurable indicators of excellence are the only ones that count, matter and have meaning (Bansel, 2014, p. 6).⁵ Extrapolated further, these accounts begin to reveal the power of the discourse to elicit knowledge about school excellence and the capacity of experts to institutionalise it as an accredited knowledge system (Rajagopal, 2014, p. 2). At the same time, this knowledge adds to the controlling power of the discourse to create what Stickney (2013) describes as the ‘is/oughts’ of an authorised power/knowledge dyad (p. 658).

School effectiveness creates the discursive conditions, sets the parameters and nominates a currency for calculating excellence in schools. However, the power/knowledge *effects* of the discourse of excellence are more fully revealed in the detection of an immanent ordering in the practices, strategies and interventions of government. Here, the discourse is imbricated with a power/knowledge dispositif that functions as a regime of truth against which claims to excellence can be judged as true or false. Institutional policies, directives, processes and technologies, conjoined with the self-governance requirements of the neoliberal subject, work to

⁵Heffernan (2018) adds theoretical weight to ideas like those of Bansel (2014) by invoking the notion of a ‘sociology of numbers’. She claims that this notion embodies the idea that ‘numbers are fair and rigorous representations of the work undertaken in schools and indeed may be adopted as a means of making this work measurable or accessible to those with little knowledge of the field, providing licence to make judgments without having expertise to support these judgments’ (p. 7).

ensure that principals pursue particular subjectivities that signal excellence and that they measure, order and classify their efforts to be excellent and articulate these with the quasi-marketised schooling environment and its school choice policies.

Amongst the heterogeneous elements of the dispositif that impose themselves at school level, the following macro-influences gained some prominence in my interviews and document analysis in fieldwork:

- The regime of high-stakes testing (in particular, NAPLAN testing) and standardised curriculum that is used to create comparative measures of achievement across schools.
- The use of NAPLAN test data on the *MySchool* website to provide the community with simplified (and colour-coded) representations of bad, good and excellent schools and, in turn, the construction of media-friendly school league tables that make abundantly clear that while ‘everyone should be excellent ... not everyone can be excellent’ (Peter, 2018, p. 47).
- Various accountability and surveillance processes, typically conducted at state and regional level, which dwell on NAPLAN and other data in order to proffer an outside perspective on the realisation of local excellence aspirations. Heffernan (2018) brings a paradoxical quality to these processes of ‘local’ measurement when she notes that ‘(o)bjectivity is implied by the presentation of numbers, facts, and figures in standardised forms that do not take local contexts or complexities into account’ (p. 7).
- The sets of professional competencies and standards for principals and teachers that both promulgate precise links between the quality of the input of school staff and improvement in the outputs of students and assume the pre-eminence of school-based actions in the achievement of excellence.

While each of these elements represent various Australian national and state policy initiatives, it is also important to recognise the less ostentatious, but arguably more deeply affecting local processes that establish the truth status of the excellence discourse. In my fieldwork, these local calls to excellence were observed in the attention paid by principals to messages from further up the hierarchy about their reputation, progress and achievement. They were also noted in the conversation of principals with teachers and students about externally developed measures of excellence and the necessity to take shared responsibility for their implementation. In school documents, such as site improvement and performance development plans, the local influence of the discourse could be detected in descriptions of aspirations for excellence that relied on numerical achievement targets, based on NAPLAN and other external measures, to plot progress and to secure motivation.

The ordering of these elements into a power/knowledge dispositif is neither objective nor politically disinterested. As Pignatelli (2002) notes:

Embedded in these systems are a cluster of technologies of power – e.g., the grid, the timetable, the chart, the graph, the examination – which promise greater efficiency in defining and measuring stages of excellence, mediocrity, and failure, as they sort, circulate, and manage, reward and punish students, staff, and schools. (p. 171)

For principals, the discourse of excellence, and its power/knowledge effects, foregrounds the discursive and material conditions for a particular subjectivity. They invite the principal to secure themselves and their work through an engagement with the notion of excellence that includes an acceptance of quantified measures of effectiveness and submission to the technologies through which these measures are turned into tools of judgement, competition and comparison. As a subject of the discourse, principals are expected to engage in and promote its practices and use the speaking rights it confers to ensure that others do the same. In these ways of governing, various subject positions emerge for the principal which signal success and improvement and excellence. They offer the pleasures of performance to those who can inhabit these positions with a sense of achievement, although they are premised on the positioning of 'others' outside of such pleasures (Maguire, Hoskins, Ball, & Braun, 2011, p. 608).

While the policy discourse of excellence may appear incontrovertible in its mobilisation of principals towards superior performance and achievement, Peter (2018) claims that 'the excellence discourse is as efficacious as it is fragile' (p. 47). Against depictions of a totalising force, and in keeping with my promised processual treatment of neoliberal governmentality, my critical explanation of the discourse of excellence and its dispositif of power/knowledge draws from a number of intersecting discourses that work to contradict its truth claims, to render it more fragile and suggest that the subjectivities of principals may cross into different discursive fields.

This explanation starts by drawing somewhat opportunistically from the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* (2015). In summarising how *the Standard* sets out what successful principals are expected to know, understand and do, it claims to take 'full account of the crucial contribution' principals make to 'excellence and equity' (p. 4). While an admirable sentiment, this twinning of excellence with equity points to a major contradiction that the discourse of excellence must work to ameliorate and conceal. In drawing measures of excellence, under the auspices of school effectiveness, from numerical calculations of school-based variables, the discourse fails to account for those things that are marginalised and left out of the measures. When factors such as family background and social class are regarded as 'noise' that must not be allowed to interrupt the focus on school factors, the effect, following Willmott (1999), is to 'conceal the reality of structured inequality' and instead 'point the finger of blame ... firmly at individuals' such as teachers and school leaders 'for inefficient and wasteful schools' (pp. 255–256).

Following this interpretation, the additional risks faced by principals can be detected in this shifting of responsibility for social justice and equity outcomes to schools. These outcomes must now occur within the strictures of dominant neoliberal policy discourses, such as the discourses of choice and excellence. They are increasingly tied up in accountabilities related to individual school performance, rather than being seen as a systems responsibility, so that leaders and teachers in individual schools are seen as primarily responsible (see Thomas & Watson, 2011). Thus, the pairing of excellence and equity becomes highly problematic when principals, wanting to continue the local work of improving social justice and equity

outcomes, must do so against the momentum of policy demands and their applied strictures.

While the assumption in the excellence discourse that ‘what is possible for an individual must be possible for all individuals at the same time’ is highly compatible with the individuated social policy of neoliberalism (Willmott, 1999, p. 267), it quietens references to significant variations in the social circumstances of students. Belinda, principal of Sullivan School (the lowest SES school in my study), makes these circumstances and their effects abundantly clear:

So we measured for the first year and a quarter. What had happened in our school was that the kids went backwards. Which is what the state does, it's the trend and we haven't bucked the trend. I don't think we ever will. Our kids didn't get potty trained, they didn't get read to, they didn't have that talk that says, 'we're doing to kindy and when we get to kindy we are going to ... so get in the car and we'll do it'. They haven't had any of that. So, if I just think about that, I wouldn't do the job because I would always be working from a deficit model.

Left to its own devices, the neoliberal policy discourse of excellence creates sharp divisions between excellent and failing schools – divisions that follow lines of social class and economic wealth but are, nevertheless, sheeted home to school-based factors such as inadequate teaching and ineffective leadership. Its power/knowledge effects, obscured by the outwardly benign expectation of equality of outcomes for all, are, in the words of Slater and Griggs (2015), both ‘coercive’ and ‘duplicitous’ (p. 441). Thus, the discourse of excellence secures its hegemony by preying on a desire for quality schooling in educationally dispossessed communities while at the same time enforcing measures of excellence that are largely disconnected from, and unattainable in, those communities.

This twinning of excellence and equity brings more ambiguous and variegated qualities to the neoliberal policy discourse of excellence. Moving closer to the interests of this book, it suggests that detailed consideration of the impact on principals’ lives and work in those schools servicing disadvantaged communities is missing from the excellence commentary. In these places, principals are responding to the same demands as their counterparts in richer schools while often having to make riskier decisions about the allocation of resources, make headway in the face of ‘pernicious outcome statistics’ (Thomson, 2004, p. 2), respond to more transient communities and manage a more vulnerable and diverse student cohort.

This analysis is illustrative of a second-level critique at the margins of the excellence discourse. By asking ‘inside’ questions about the discursive limits of its ‘outside’ claims to power and truth, it reveals how certain contradictions are obscured or subjugated by the dominant neoliberal logic. Further ambiguity arises when mandated excellence measures are juxtaposed with local aspirations. Janet, principal at Caldicott School, responding to an interview question about the tension between raising high-stakes test scores and other purposes of schooling, says:

That's a challenge across the board in education, because essentially what's valued is what's measured, and while what's measured is NAPLAN results, it's very limiting.

Janet's comments suggest an apparent ambiguity stemming from the way mandated calls for excellence, predicated on narrow and homogenised test measures, may actually work against the realisation of broader local educational goals. Bates (2013) expands this link into the distinctly paradoxical by claiming 'the relentless focus on standards has changed the system in ways that suggest an erosion of educational quality' (p. 39). Applied to principals, and their efforts to attain excellence, the policy technology of standardisation recasts qualities as quantities and, drawing from Higgins (2011), values 'efficiency and productivity ... as ends in themselves' (p. 453). It suggests favoured subjectivities and renders excellence as a stark, disciplinary mechanism for judging principal effectiveness and worth.

The Entrepreneurship Discourse

The discourse of entrepreneurship shifts my analytical attention directly to the modes of subjectivity made available to principals under conditions of neoliberal governmentality. Dey (2014) sets the scene for the problematisation of this policy discourse by describing how it works as a 'programmable reality' to turn 'the social into a space of competition, individual responsibility and self-organisation by demanding entrepreneurial virtues and behaviours from people who until recently were not envisioned as entrepreneurs' (p. 55). As Walkerdine and Bansel (2010) claim in their treatment of 'neoliberalism as entrepreneurship', the 'passive citizen of the welfare state' becomes 'the citizen as active entrepreneur of the self' with an expectation that they will capitalise 'on existence itself through calculated acts and investments' (p. 4).

In the world of business and economics, being entrepreneurial is generally associated with shifting responsibility away from the state in order to posit the creativity, agility and shrewdness of individuals and private enterprises as a solution to gaining the best share of resources in austere times. Translated to schools, and 'shifting the locus of "austerity" from the private sector to the public space' (Dey, 2014, p. 61), the discourse of entrepreneurship responds to, and supports, the already established discursive registers of competition and achievement and, I contend, is most obviously embodied in expectations about the demeanour, conduct and priorities of principals in response to a different set of scarcities.

The entrepreneurial principal is formulated as part of a rational solution to a perceived problem amongst parent/consumers of a shortage of 'good' schools and as an in-school solution to securing more student enrolments – especially 'good' enrolments – in order to keep the school viable. In the state system in which the schools in my research are situated, perceptions of the need for an entrepreneurial principal appear to be exacerbated by the dominance of neoliberal logic 'which privileges the private sector over the public sector' (Angus, 2012, p. 232). Imogen, the principal of McCullough School, suggests how this plays out in her local context:

We've got a college next door, for goodness sake, an independent school, so I've got to actually ask, 'why go there, when you should come here? This is what we offer. VET is free and it's very expensive there and a whole lot of other things ...' Obviously, I wouldn't say that, but that's an aspect of that I'm having to do.

Entrepreneurial principals, in an idealised form, are subjects who prevail in economically challenging conditions. Thinking with Dey (2014), they are amenable to the normative script of neoliberal governmental reason 'which compels them to internalise entrepreneurial principles and values out of practical necessity' (p. 62). They seek to develop and capitalise on personal qualities such as agility, enthusiasm and enterprise; to take responsibility for their own choices, expertise and susceptibilities; and to watch, measure and audit the value they return to their schools.

Imogen gives an insight into the processes, as well as some of the benefits and costs, of this self-capitalisation:

I think the first thing is about maintaining the level of energy. I really noticed that within the first year that I was finding that I was working really long hours at work. I'd be taking it home, long hours at home. Then, of course, trying to put on the bright face the next day and not being able to keep up with the energy. If you don't have the energy, how can you be there for staff? Also, I try to have an open door policy. I try to be as visible, especially with staff, as much as I can. I find it difficult to be out there with students, but nevertheless I do try to do that. Looking after my own wellbeing, I think that has been the hardest thing.

The enterprising and creative efforts of principals and schools, as already noted in analysis of the choice discourse, are deeply enmeshed with trying to meet consumer expectations. Jack, from Lawson School, notes the historical emergence of these efforts:

I've been working in schools since 1987 and in that time I've seen the role of principals change a huge amount, from being somebody who was almost a figurehead at a school ... to somebody that has to be very dynamic, respond to community needs, respond to educational department needs, parent needs, teacher needs, student needs.

By extension, casting principals as entrepreneurs is to fit them to a programmatic ambition of neoliberal government where 'empowerment and obligation go hand-in-hand' (Ball, 2013, pp. 130–131). Principals are implored to use conferred freedoms in enterprising and responsive ways, with their subjectivity simultaneously secured, following Davies and Bansell (2010), in 'their individuality and their regulation as responsibilised and accountable subjects' (p. 9). That the enacting of this government of freedom is a form of control did not escape the attention of participants in my research. Seb, from Sullivan School, notes the constraints on principal freedom:

The principal provides leadership and guidance of the school within certain constraints. And the constraints are the rules and regulations you have to work under. They can only do in a school what they are allowed to do ... whilst they are trying to get the best out of their school and the best for their students.

Felicity, also from Sullivan School, after describing the principal as a 'pilot' who looks to maximise the benefits of centralised policy in their own school, ponders how they must balance autonomy and accountability:

I think we are seeing this increasing accountability, at the same time we've seen an increase in devolution of responsibility to schools. Which actually in some ways could be interpreted as being counter to this idea of increased accountability. So it's a bit of a fine line that the principal needs to walk.

Simons and Masschelein (2008) describe the mode of subjection favoured by the discourse of entrepreneurship as 'a permanent economic tribunal' (p. 54) that provides a particular way of knowing the 'true' principal. Returning to *homo oeconomicus* (Foucault, 2008), this knowing is derived from the practices of the individuated and depoliticised subject, whose conduct is pegged to the enterprise form. Its 'truth' relies on individual self-understanding of how certain behaviours, skills and qualities yield benefits in terms of satisfying the rationality of the market. In practice, these are benefits such as improved competitiveness, school-of-choice status and greater market share of enrolments, realised because principals 'assume responsibility for themselves and others by dint of acting and thinking like entrepreneurs' (Dey, 2014, p. 62).

Thus, the principal as entrepreneur is performatively constituted, with the conditions of freedom that neoliberal governmentality demands making available a range of resources and techniques of self-formation while, at the same time, working to hide the political intentions of the entrepreneurship discourse. This is not to suggest that subjectivity replaces power in neoliberal conceptions of the entrepreneurial subject but, rather, that subjectivity is the site in which power operates (see Protevi, 2009). Knights (2009) provides the following insight into the relations of subjectivity and power/knowledge in this discourse:

subjectivity is not only one of the conditions that make knowledge and its relationship to power possible but it is also a self-fulfilling effect of such power/knowledge. This is because knowledge is grounded in representations of reality that cannot be constructed independently of certain constitutions of subjectivity that it goes on to reproduce. (p. 158)

Exercised through various technologies of government, these power/knowledge arrangements target the bodies and souls of principals and work to constitute them as subjects that identify with being entrepreneurial and are thereby drawn to reproducing the entrepreneurial practices that define them. Its discursive field is marked out by a heterogeneous and complex dispositif which polices its frontiers and determines the conditional freedoms and constrained choices that are made available. It is a dispositif that divides the practices of the entrepreneur away from older depictions of the principal as staid, reactionary and bureaucratic. Discursively, it interprets personal qualities as entrepreneurial potentialities to be instrumentalised and applied to better results in the school marketplace. To support its normalisation, it harnesses various technologies of (self)control and (self)surveillance, third-party renditions of required standards of professionalism⁶ and the rewards of recognition

⁶While this reference is, most obviously, to the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals*, it encompasses a range of other third-party documents, such as professionalism/performance rubrics, psychometric tests and various state-based leadership frameworks.

and performance embodied in a multiplicity of ceremonies, awards and professional opportunities.

To guard against an overdetermined account of the effects of the discourse of entrepreneurship on the principal subject, it is necessary to move away from attributions of dominance and the willing acquiescence of principals at its centre and towards more marginal possibilities. Binkley (2009) provides a useful entry to this type of second-level critique when he claims that ‘top-down’ readings of neoliberal governmentality that ‘consider how neoliberal subjects work to optimize, individualize and entrepreneurialize themselves and their conduct’ are also ‘shadowed by a certain ambivalence and instability, a technique of subjectification that remains open to the potential for being otherwise practiced’ (pp. 63–64).

This opening, previously revealed in limited ways at the intersection and coalescence of discourses of choice and excellence, is made wider by considering ‘the unleashing of the entrepreneurial spark’ (Dey, 2014, p. 61) in principals – a spark of active and practical self-production that may have plural constitutive possibilities. Referring again to Foucault’s (1977) notion of the ‘soul’ as a product of various forms of power exercised around, on and within the principal subject (p. 29), I interpret the task at the margins of this discourse of entrepreneurship as refuting the inevitability and muscularity of its power/knowledge effects and as beginning to compile evidence of a political struggle for the soul of the principal. This task requires both ‘rebuilding a sensibility for the contradictory nature of governing’ (Dey, 2014, p. 66) and creating new spaces of freedom⁷ where ethical and territorial contests can emerge and productive forms of ambivalence, transgression and resistance can develop.

This is not to suggest that entrepreneurship is the original or only site of such a struggle. Rather, calls for the principal to be entrepreneurial provide a useful starting point because they advance, as a tactic of neoliberal governmentality, an ideal version of the principal subject – one that can be tested against my empirical evidence of principal practice to help discern the reach of its power/knowledge disposition and the nature and uptake of its contradictory opposites. Certainly, in analysis of my field data, entrepreneurial rationalities were identified as prominent and influential. However, subservience to the rational discourse was rendered incomplete by observation of alternative practices and expression of contradictory truth claims. For example, ephemeral expressions of solidarity, refusal, resistance and cooperation in my data formed into a type of marginalised opposition to dominant readings of entrepreneurship. Principal expressions of values of trust, concern, equity and democratic participation were also taken as symptomatic of a more contestable terrain than that revealed by the pervasive truth regime.

⁷In a chapter titled *Unforeseeable freedom* (Derrida & Roudinesco, 2004), Derrida cautions against careless use of the word ‘freedom’. However, he adds an interpretation that accords with my use of the word in the phrase ‘new spaces of freedom’. He says he would ‘militate for a recognition and respect’ for a freedom that ‘is an excess of play in the machine, an excess of every determinate machine’ (p. 48–9).

Chapter 7 includes a portrait of Imogen, the principal at McCullough School, which focusses on her enterprising practices – her efforts to get the best from herself and to project the best possible image of her school. This chapter also contains several paradoxes which work to test the rationality of the discourse of entrepreneurship.

The Managerialism Discourse

In transcripts of my field interviews and observation notes, the numerous metaphoric references to the principal as ‘captain of the ship’ and as ‘company CEO’ link to a version of leadership that Clarke (2013) describes as ‘neoliberal managerialism’ (p. 233). They imply the uncritical colonisation of schools by marketing and managerial values. These references are further enriched by unsolicited and often detailed extensions of these metaphors to (1) attributions of superior visionary, organisational, management and problem-solving qualities found in the principal and (2) attaching personal qualities such as enterprising, charismatic, determined and influential to principal descriptions. The following interview excerpts further elaborate the managerialist discourse and its pronouncement, proclamation and designation of principals as ‘leaders’:

I see the principal as the leader of the school, so for me the principal is really the captain of the ship in determining where we go in terms of the overarching philosophies. I see the principal as setting the main agendas within the school in conjunction with governing council. And, I see that their particular role is really to inspire and lead the staff to achieve those absolute goals that we have. (Felicity, Sullivan School)

She’s our leader. She’s our motivator. She deals with the business side of running our organisation. (Rita, McCullough School)

I equate the principal’s role to that of a CEO in a small to medium sized company. Basically, they’re responsible for running the school effectively, ensuring the resources are available as and when needed in order to deliver on a curriculum. That staff are managed and performance of staff is managed effectively, so that they deliver the programs that are required to get the children through the curriculum. And at the same time, they are managing up through the education system, not too dissimilar to a board, in delivering on the expectations of key stakeholders and also their funders. And so, it’s very much like a CEO. (Odette, Sullivan School Governing Council)

The frequent evocation of the language and pragmatic logic of business and enterprise in these descriptions points to what Lingard (2011) describes as the ‘ecumenical application of private sector management practices in the public sector’ (p. 370). Such descriptions also support my inclusion of managerialism as a constitutively influential policy discourse of neoliberalism as they:

- Privilege certain ‘identity categories’ (Youdell, 2006) that impose a conception of the principal as a versatile, autonomous and responsible agent and discard older notions of bureaucratic and professional leadership

- Depict a simplified rendition of the principalship based on an untroubled take-up of generic structures and processes from the private sector, an easy equating of success with measurable outputs and a willing embrace of the outside language of goals, strategies and deliverables
- Suggest the discursive imposition of the performative expectations of neoliberal governmentality in the principal's concerns with promoting personal excellence, motivating others to produce quality outcomes and generating a collaborative commitment to competitive excellence
- Evoke the importance of a potent individual at the top and the ready acceptance amongst followers of the positional authority and exceptional individual qualities of the designated leader

The problematisation on the very surface of this discourse is found in constructing managerialism as a version of school leadership that is the solution to formulated problems of inefficiency and ineffectiveness. It proposes a visible and measurable response to public perceptions of low standards, lack of direction and variations in quality between schools. Managerialism looks past the political, ethical and social dimensions of these 'problems' to construe them, instead, as issues of management 'that new and more efficient managerial regimes can resolve' (Lynch, 2014, p. 4). It presents to principals, through policy and an array of associated supports, a new insight into what counts as knowledge and a seductive and accessible set of strategies that appear to offer, following Wright (2001), 'a rational, value-free approach to solving their immediate problems' (p. 284). Managerialism, thus, builds on the previously discussed subjectivity of the entrepreneurial principal by adding the macro-value systems of private enterprise as constitutively important in the micro-processes of principal subject formation.

My critical explanation of the discourse of managerialism works to refute its neutral, apolitical and strategic posturing by revealing it as a political project for governing the conduct of principals. As a body of knowledge, this discourse speaks about the principal subject in specific ways. It positions principals as advocates and enthusiasts and, after Wright (2001), invites them to apprehend managerialism as both a set of beliefs and a set of practices (p. 281). In the first instance, working from Foucault's (1972) description of discourses as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which it speak' (p. 54), I take the policy discourse of managerialism as working to form principal subjects that embrace the language and pragmatics of managerialism and put managerial practices to work in their schools.

In grasping managerialism, principals are asked to embrace the nomenclature of 'customers', 'competition' and 'market share' and to undertake calculative and technical work directed to the measurement of their school's educational outputs. Thinking with Lynch (2014), this work includes privileging efficiency and productivity over 'social and moral values' such as 'trust, integrity and solidarity with others' (p. 5). Their compassion, in managerial terms, hinges on relations of power that evoke pastoral notions of the shepherd managing the flock (see Chap. 3), whereby principals are encouraged to cultivate the obedience of staff by shepherding them to the acceptance of managerialist truth claims. In proposing change and

improvement in their school, managerialist principals are expected not only to develop a preference for data-rich processes borrowed from private enterprise but also to attend to the willing participation of others in these processes and to the alignment of their school-based aspirations with the priorities of centrally developed policy.

The power/knowledge pairings in these managerial practices confer truth status on the managerial discourse and rely on a broad dispositif of discursive and non-discursive practices that work on and within the principal subject to induce their willing participation. This dispositif is inclusive of outwardly applied technologies of standardisation, accountability and surveillance. However, in accordance with principles of neoliberal governmentality, it is the practices of self-regulation directed to a subjectivity that internalises managerial values that are arguably most telling. Lynch (2014) describes ‘a governing of the soul that deploys new technologies of the self, governing from the inside out’ (p. 4). Subjectivity is here invoked as an ‘exercise of managerial power’ by which principals ‘come to know themselves’ (Thomas, 2009, p. 171). This is a productive power that regulates principal’s ‘hopes, fears and expectations of success’ (Lynch, 2014, p. 4) while, simultaneously, providing them with calculative opportunities for great authority and control, for example, in the management of finances and achievement data.

In this somewhat idealised reading of the uptake of the managerial discourse by principals, the self-disciplined subject finds their own seductions and generates their own compliance, so that the hegemony of the discourse appears assured. The constitutive effect is to categorise (Styhre, 2001) and technicise (Thomson, 2001) principals and their work. One prominent method of categorisation and technicisation occurs through third-party renditions of principal leadership, typically in the ‘leadership by adjective’ (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2007, p. 202) designations of instructional leader, transformational leader, authentic leader, democratic leader, etc. While this type of categorisation manifests in ostensibly useful checklists of abstract attributes and technical skills (that someone else thinks principals will need in order to be effective), it also has more telling effects by specifying preferred subject positions within the broader discursive field. To add greater complexity to the theoretical account of managerialism I have so far provided, I will now use an example of these effects from my fieldwork. The example draws principally from interview responses to questions about the principal as ‘instructional leader’.

One of the consequences of a managerialist categorisation of principals as instructional leaders is to assume a straightforward connection between principal practice and student learning. More specifically, the discourse of managerialism favours a more technical input-output model of schooling that posits a causal link between the strategies and techniques the principal deploys and the quality of measurable outcomes, as read from standardised tests of student achievement. The performative efforts of principals to position their subjectivity within the discourse are illustrated by the following observations from two of the principal participants in my study:

Principals, ultimately, they're ultimately responsible. The principal is the person that's steering the ship and leading direction. The buck stops with the principal. The principal, yeah, if there is data that is negative and not positive, I would be questioning myself and asking myself, 'Well, how have I worked with others? What's happened in my work with others that has facilitated this particular breakdown' (Rob, principal, Heatherbank School)

When you're a principal, you really do feel there's a level of accountability. You're there. You're leading the school and if it fails, you're failing because of your leadership. Because you've got all these people in front of you and you're working with them, but they're not being accountable. (Belinda, principal, Lawson School)

These comments suggest that principals identify with, and thereby reproduce, the very operations of the discourse of managerialism that constructs them as subjects. They appear to be knowing participants in practices invoked by power/knowledge pairings in this discourse that posit a direct connection between principal practice and improved student achievement. The significance of these examples lies in the slippage between the rhetoric of the discourse and a more complex set of observations from my fieldwork and from the critical leadership studies literature. For example, Sasha, principal at Sullivan School, disputes the connection:

It is built on a lie and that is that the principal can affect the student learning outcomes. That's actually in the research; they found that principals have about that much effect [gestures a very small effect] on student learning outcomes.

Veronica, from McCullough School, highlights the unfortunate effects of conflating principal and student performance:

It's a bit of a shame that there seems to be so much pressure on principals to perform well in these types of tests like NAPLAN ... I know of principals in the past that have felt that pressure so hard that they've actually removed specific data from data sets to ensure that things reflect positively on the school as well as on the principal.

On a different plane, Carlo, from Sullivan School, laments the normalising effect on principals of an emphasis on testing and outcomes:

One of the things that really worries me is the normalising influences that are around us – the bringing of education back to meeting a set of key performance criteria and external examination criteria. I like the idea that a principal can be freed up to be an advocate for the mission of the school in the community and in the education department. Actually given the freedom to speak for the school, rather than to have to be constrained to what I think are very normalising influences of standardised testing and specific outcomes.

The managerialist expectation that principals have capacity to deliver success 'in the currency of test scores' (MacBeath, 2007, p. 244) is also heavily contested in the literature. Thomson (2004) claims 'the absurdity of the assignation of total responsibility' to principals for student outcomes (p. 2), while Muijs (2011) describes a 'great deal of rhetoric' coming from studies of the leadership/learning link, but says 'when we examine these studies more closely it is clear that most leadership variables are only modestly related to outcomes, and in some studies no relationships were found at all' (p. 45). I have included this example to illustrate the 'Trojan' offers that managerialist practice (Wright, 2001, p. 285) makes to principals. This

deceptive quality helps shift my analysis into more empirical and contestable spaces at the margins of the discourse of managerialism.

The power/knowledge effects of the discourse of managerialism have, so far, been shown to both draw upon and inform a raft of policy texts that support, for example, the generation of data from high-stakes testing, the evaluation of school and individual performance and the standardisation of conduct, behaviour and practice. However, the political heft of the discourse is not restricted to its relations with formal policy. Coextensive with policy, and often drawing from it and intersecting and enriching its ambitions, is a vast ‘education leadership industry’ (Gunter, 2013, p. 206) concerned with ‘providing practical guides to running schools in an era of devolved management’ (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003, p. 12). This industry comprises a varied array of managerialist texts, travelling experts, consultancies, professional learning opportunities and leadership theories. By nature, practical and accessible, this industry is shaped by the common-sense logics, techniques and problem-solving qualities of managerialism. I cite it here not to dwell on the possible limitations and repetitions of its ‘how to’ approach but rather to underline the ubiquitous take-up of its simplified accounts of managerial school leadership and the substantial obstacle they put in the way of alternative readings.

If, as Thrupp and Willmott (2003) contend, managerialism ‘has clearly become *the* solution of our time’ (p. 12, italics in original), a shift to its discursive margins is made against a prevailing orthodoxy that is both popular and entrenched. However, the necessity of such a shift, I argue, is to access a key agenda for critical leadership studies – to make an empirical case for the inadequacies and contingencies of the current managerialist order. To conclude this section, I describe two techniques that I use in my deployment of a paradox interpretive lens in [Chap. 7](#) to access and advance this key agenda:

- Following Foucault’s (2000) problematisation as ‘the work of thought’, I take his entreaty to ‘turn a given into a question’ as requiring the taken-for-granted qualities of managerialism be problematised in order that ‘diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response’ (p. 118). In this work, I seek to shift the problem-making emphasis away from perceptions of inefficiency and ineffectiveness, to instead question the rational, calculative and simplistic qualities of managerialism – to try to reveal these qualities as antithetical to the educative and caring purposes of schooling and as obstacles to thinking about and instating various alternatives.
- Expanding on the ‘Trojan’ offers of the discourse, I use data from my fieldwork to try to expose various managerial practices, such as visioning, strategic planning and change management, as privileged, pretentious and deceptive. Of particular relevance to the easy admission of these practices into the mainstream are the connections they make with the managerial tenets of principal primacy, masculine and heroic leadership and the ‘ethic of autonomous selfhood’ (Rose, 1998, p. 17). Critical analysis of these connections using a paradox lens suggests the need for principals to (re)claim political, professional and ethical positions weakened or lost in the push to managerialism.

Conclusion

This chapter has ranged widely across, what was described at its outset, as the many ambiguous contests that characterise a vast body of commentary about neoliberalism in education and other social fields. In conclusion, I avoid the inherently reductive process of summarising the many strands that have been followed. Instead, I try to capture retrospectively at least three different methodological possibilities that have emerged from the various analyses in the hope that this amounts to a more expansive exercise in knowledge building and transferable possibilities.

Firstly, my analysis of policy discourses both exhibits and capitalises on what might be termed a ‘policy sociology’ approach. Ozga (1990) claims as the defining quality of a policy sociology the bringing together in analysis of systems-level policy development and micro-level investigation of the perceptions and experiences of those implementing policy (p. 361). In this chapter, the introduction of the voices of principals (and others) was to highlight the social complexities of the policy work of principals and, following Grace (1995), to resist ‘the tendency of policy science to abstract problems from their relational settings by insisting that the problem can only be understood in the complexity of those relations’ (p. 3). Such positioning has helped 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.

Grace (1995) also claims for policy sociology, a propensity to illuminate ‘the cultural and ideological struggles in which schooling is located’ (p. 3). This political work is emphasised by Gale (2001) who invokes the term ‘critical policy sociology’ in order to better align its methodological qualities with those of the critical social sciences (p. 381). In adopting this critical orientation, I looked to find an ‘epistemic edge’ (Clarke, Bainton, Lendvai, & Stubbs, 2015, p. 196) by taking policy as a form of knowledge production which advances a neoliberal conception of the principal subject. This edge was further honed by a personal political conviction that certain of these discourses, and the knowledge claims they make, had become sedimented within schools and that my research should be directed to both critiquing their dominance and vested interests and revitalising contradictory positions.

A policy sociology also admits a more nuanced and inconstant version of neoliberalism from that which proffers an ‘essential and global truth’ (Brown, 2015, p. 21). With its insistence on the intrusion of micro-level interests, a policy sociology approach suggests the possibility of variegation and contingency in the way policy discourses shape the lives and work of principals. In support of this position, Brown (2015) claims, as a common feature of scholarly analysis, that ‘neoliberalism has no fixed or settled coordinates, that there is temporal and geographical variety in its discursive formulations, policy entailments, and material practices’ (p. 20). To commence Chap. 5, I draw on the diversity and inconstancy of these ‘processual’ (Springer, 2012, p. 135) readings of neoliberalism and apply them to principal subject formation. A process of principal ‘neoliberalisation’ is proposed

and, subsequently, used to help demarcate the lines of a struggle for the soul of the principal.

Secondly, in rendering policy as (and inside of) discourse, I claim several productive possibilities. Importantly, this rendition conceives of policy as having meaning beyond a policy-as-text interpretation. Ozga (2000) broadens the scope of policy texts to include any ‘vehicle or medium for carrying or transmitting a policy message’ (p. 33). Such a definition supports, in my own inquiries, the inclusion into policy of devices like spoken directives, official instructions and the various processes of marketing and promotion that announce and endorse new policy texts. The broadening of meaning is also suggestive of the more dynamic and unstable qualities of policy, introducing the contingency of ‘central input and local inflections’ (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 15) in order to interrupt notions of a linear flow of policy knowledge and assumptions of a smooth and untroubled implementation of ruler ambitions and intentions in schools.

As a corollary to a more expansive understanding of policy, new critical and interpretive possibilities arise in treating policy as both formed and made operational within discourse. This positioning is inclusive of Bacchi’s (2000) interest in ‘the active marshalling of discourses for political purposes’ (p. 45) and of the grammar of ‘policy actors’ and ‘policy subjects’ in the creation and delimiting of particular speaker/actor positions. It also extends to research into spaces of struggle associated with the ‘discursive battles’ over policy responsibilities (Keller, 2011, p. 52) and the designation of principals as both subjects and users of dominant discourses (Bacchi, 2000).

Thirdly, the interpretive ‘grid’ devised from Foucauldian tools and the work of other researchers and put to use in my discourse analysis was positioned as a necessary intervention in the often simplified and naive way in which observation and interview data collected from the field are treated as ‘pipelines’ for knowledge transmission (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004, p. 141). In resisting the reification of methods and the simplification of analysis, I was drawn to the more complex task of considering how my data could be made to work beyond common-sense interpretations and idealised accounts. I assert, from this experience, that the dearth of interpretive tools suited to critically oriented work in qualitative research undermines the more imaginative and expansive ambitions of researchers and leaves unsupported the interpretive workload that the researcher must assume if they are to move beyond the literal meaning of spoken and written input.

A corollary – and in some ways a corrective – to my observations about the (un)availability of interpretative tools in critical research lies in the way researchers use the extant literature. In this chapter I have worked beyond the conventional ‘mapping of the field’ function to actively deploy the literature drawn from within and beyond my field as a form of ‘textual data’⁸ providing both an intellectual resource and a summative understanding of the state of the field. In doing this, I have tried to

⁸ ‘Textual data’ is used descriptively to indicate the contribution of literature to my empirical work (rather than to suggest a link, metaphorical or otherwise, to the technical process of extracting data from texts).

emphasise the need for an expansion of my archive beyond data collected in the field by treating parts of the vast canon of literature on neoliberalism as an additional data source. Given that it is not easy to systematise these literatures, I also rely on a principle established by Lather (1999) that a cut of the literature that is ‘situated, partial and perspectival’ is more feasible and useful than an ‘exhaustive’ coverage (p. 3). In making such a cut, I have favoured those texts that provide both an intellectual resource and a summative understanding of the state of the field, while, at the same time, pushing my own work at its critical frontiers.

While this chapter has been less overtly linked to the book’s paradox conceptual frame, it has been marked by ubiquitous references to conflict, ambiguity and tension. While these ideas have formed something of a thematic running through the historical, methodological and analytical concerns of the chapter, I have not attempted to generalise or characterised their operations or to distil them into any fixed form. Rather, these themes have been used to hold open some of the complex and contrary forces that go to shaping the lives and work of principals. In Chap. 5, I embark on a more deliberate consolidation of these themes as I look to (1) take the process of principal neoliberalisation as opening a more contestable and ambiguous field of constitutive possibilities; (2) reveal in detail the lines of struggle for the soul of the principal and possible tactics for principal participation in such a struggle; and (3) prepare the way for the subsequent paradox chapters (Chaps. 6, 7 and 8) by dealing with the pragmatic considerations of bringing a paradox lens to the interpretation of empirical data.

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