

Chapter 7

Paradoxes of Neoliberal Policy



The paradoxes of neoliberal policy draw heavily from discourse analysis undertaken in Chap. 4, where the origins and developmental arc of several of the paradoxes which follow were foreshadowed. These paradoxes use my ethnographic data to discern the presence of struggle in the interactions between principals and the policy expectations bestowed centrally. In continuing to examine the power relations that mark and shape these interactions, the paradoxes are also concerned with the power/knowledge exertions of policy, including the neoliberal conceptions of the principal leadership that they advance, the will to truth they prompt in principal subjects and the governmental power they generate from their ‘expert-technical’ understanding of the domain to be governed (Hunter, 1994, p. 148). The paradoxes seek to interrupt the reification of these forces into singular and productive entities by exposing more fragile and contingent qualities and by revealing the simultaneous and interdependent existence of valid oppositions.

While my fieldwork revealed ‘ridiculously short timelines’ in adhering to staffing policy (Jay, Caldicott School), ‘more policy than ever to be enacted’ (Janet, Caldicott School) and policy documentation ‘that is incredibly onerous’ (Tesia, McCullough School), I have not taken these observations as exposing the most productive space of paradoxical contest. Rather, my analysis centres on the tension between centralised policy-making and dispersed local practices.

The first paradox in this chapter, *the paradox of policy implementation*, utilises a space of ‘translation’ (Clarke, Bainton, Lendvai, & Stubbs, 2015) between what policy-makers intend and what actually happens to policy when it is enacted in schools. This paradox draws from Ball’s (1994) broadening of the definition of policy to include ‘what is enacted as well as what is intended’ and his subsequent description of the ‘wild profusion of local practices’ that render policies as incomplete (p. 10). This paradox uses field data to reveal broader possibilities for principal practice in policy enactment beyond their idealised casting as untroubled conduits of governmental aspirations. The other paradoxes in this section largely derive from the broader policy discourses of neoliberalism analysed in Chap. 4. These paradoxes of *excellence, choice and equity, principal autonomy and professionalism*

highlight the presence of conflict, tension and struggle in the policy work of principals. They bring the institutional logic of policy-makers into a simultaneous and interdependent relationship with a conflicting field of local needs, competing priorities and personal tensions. In doing so, they indicate the possibility of different subjectivities and policy practices.

This chapter also highlights the influential technologies of neoliberal policy, such as *standardisation*, *accountability*, and *performativity*, which work to manufacture from policy the tools of competition, comparison, success and failure and which direct principals to preferred subjectivities. These technologies are presented by policy-makers as benign and necessary drivers of improvement in schools. However, Clarke (2013) suggests they have significant constitutive power, describing how the individual is colonised and seduced by their ‘totalising symbolic effects’ (p. 234).

The Paradox of Policy Implementation

Policy discourses so often depicted as hegemonic and homogenous, ‘given the strength of the coercive extralocal forces mobilized and channelled by neoliberalism’ (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 396), may actually materialise at site level as variegated and uneven and, therefore, susceptible to local influence and interpretation (see Springer, 2012). Rizvi and Lingard (2009) identify part of this dynamic when linking the aspirations of policy-makers with the complexity of practice:

Policy desires or imagines change – it offers an imagined future state of affairs, but in articulating desired change always offers an account somewhat more simplified than the actual realities of practice. (p. 5)

Systemically, a particular simplification is found in the casting of principals as willing and apolitical subjects, charged with the process of policy implementation at school level. The expectation that the principal will be a conduit for centrally mandated directives and work to keep the intentions of policy-makers intact is conveyed as natural and unproblematic.

Paradoxically, the primacy allocated to principals as policy subjects may actually work against desired consistency and homogeneity when precise implementation expectations come into tension with processes variously described as *translation*, *enactment* and *settlement* at site level. Principals are at once cognisant of both their systemic and legislative responsibilities and the need to respond to local mandates to adapt, diminish and even ignore central directives so that policy better meets the needs of their school. This puts principals at the centre of competing political interests where they can fashion opportunities for reinterpreting, challenging and

changing policy while necessarily espousing compliance (Berkhout, 2007, p. 408). Leanne from Heatherbank School captures the positioning of the principal neatly when she says:

It's not the principal who is making the policies; it's their role to see how those policies are going to be enacted in the school in a way that is going to benefit all the students.

Calvin, from Caldicott School, suggests principals may need more surreptitious methods to shape centralised policy to the needs of the school:

Quite often knowledge of methods is important, they need backdoor methods of getting things done, which I think comes from experience.

This paradox encapsulates, in practice, Butler's (1997) interplay of subjectivity and agency as depicted in *the paradox of politicised subjectivity* in the previous chapter. The policy discourses of neoliberalism cast principals in a particular and preferred mould while at the same time promulgating a range of principal subjectivities. These subjectivities are governed by seemingly unavoidable forms of disciplinary power and 'technologies of control' (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998, p. 329). However, in practice they are imbued with degrees of resistance, ambivalence and conformity as processes of translation, enactment and settlement are variously enacted and expectations of obedience are interrupted by more dispersed constitutive possibilities.

Some of the subjectivities available to principals in this space of 'creative enactment' (Webb, 2014, p. 366) are illustrated in my principal portraits. Sections of these portraits dwell in the fertile space between the macro concerns of policy (and policy-makers) and micro practices of principals in schools. This is to realise the difference between policy intentions and policy enactment and to understand the praxis of policy translation and its constitutive implications for principals in schools. For example, the portrait of Sasha which follows describes a subjectivity formed in part from her willingness to critique and resist policy directives and her commitment to policy being settled at site level. This is followed by a portrait of Janet which depicts a less critical and more compliant approach to policy work while also highlighting her interest in localising and customising centrally sanctioned policies to manage the demands on staff and to meet the needs of her school.

Thinking with Carpenter and Brewer (2014), these portraits emphasise the positionality of the principal as 'implicated advocate' and illustrate how principal subjectivities are 'interwoven within descriptive state developed policies' (p. 295). In their descriptions of 'with and against' responses to neoliberally inflected technologies and policies, the portraits also give insights into the ambiguity and tension intrinsic to their positioning. It is these responses that are key to understanding the paradox of policy implementation as imbued with power relations and as providing an illumination, in practice, of a struggle over principal subjectivity.

Portrait: Sasha – The Principal and Practices of Critique, Counter-Conduct and Transgression

Sasha is the principal of Sullivan School, a special interest school with enrolments from across metropolitan and country locations. She has extensive principal experience in multiple and diverse sites and uses her personal history to provide the following insight:

Every place I learnt something different, built on that at the next school and refined it further. And then there was the sameness in the leadership, the style, the communication, the challenges, the resolutions, win some and lose some.

Working as a researcher with Sasha and others at Sullivan School underscored the capacity for ethnography to reveal multiple and nuanced ways of understanding the principal and their work. In particular, through each of the data-gathering methods used, my research shed light on Sasha's appreciation of the inherent politicality of her role and work and her willingness to push back against prevailing discourses and their discursive controls.

Sasha's nuanced and complex practices of resistance described in this portrait can be interpreted, after Foucault (2007), as forms of 'counter-conduct' characterised by 'a struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others' (p. 268). Sasha's engagement in this struggle is founded on a proclivity for embracing oppositional politics and mobilising relations of power and is illustrated most obviously in her distrust of central directives and corresponding defence of local policy 'settlement'. In turn, this engagement draws attention to both the alternative forms of self-hood (or subjectivity) that these counter-conducts enable in Sasha, as well as to the practices of the self they admit and cultivate – as reflected in the efforts Sasha makes at self-styling and caring for others. Death (2016) supports this productive link between counter-conduct and subject formation, claiming these 'modes of protest which form in parallel to techniques of governmentality ... are deeply interpenetrated with the power relations they oppose; and ... facilitate or enable the production and performance of alternative subjectivities through processes of ethical self-reflection: ways of "not being like that"' (p. 202).

This account of Sasha and her work, while necessarily partial and selective (in the way of all of the principal portraits in this book), stands in contrast to the other subject positions depicted by highlighting more dissonant and counter-orthodox possibilities. Self-described as having 'a progressive education background', Sasha makes many references to her past and current efforts to both critique and resist centrally developed policies and directives. For example:

When we get to a position where we are told to do something that we don't actually believe in, like a focus on the NAPLAN scores will raise the educational outcomes of the children, we run into an ethical issue because it's not true ... or it's certainly not how I judge it. I don't judge it just because I wish to judge it like that, I've got 25 years as a principal and another 15 as a teacher behind me and all of the, you know, educational knowledge.

Sasha draws on her significant history as an educator and principal to illustrate how persistent beliefs about the impact of teaching on student learning outcomes, highlighted in a systemic push to use data to evaluate school effectiveness, have fed a tendency to blame principals and teachers for a lack of progress. Her resistance, in this case, is founded in efforts to counter the current and pervasive discourse:

We have spent a lot of time talking ... at leadership meetings about how we're going to say to the teachers, 'you're not being blamed'. Well, they are being blamed. There's absolutely no doubt about that.

Sasha is also alert to inconsistencies between policy discourses in terms of their utility and relevance to her school. She introduces her view of the policy work of principals by claiming:

It's the role of the principal, as I always put it, to settle policy ... and localise it, translate it. And those that you think are a load of crap get ignored.

Implicit in this description is Sasha's understanding of the abstract qualities of centrally developed policy and her refusal to shape her local reality in the image of this abstraction (see Bates, 2013). She further expands on the job of policy settlement:

The policy is intended to provide guidance to how it can be put into action or guide action in the local situation. The policy makers hopefully get this. Thus the meaning of the policy is negotiated in the context of the local; what does it mean for our students, their families, the resources available to us and so on. The final settlement may look a bit different across the fields in which it is considered. This is different thinking to the interpretation of policy as instructions; 'just follow them stupid'.

Sasha illustrates themes of counter-conduct and freedom most strongly around this central idea of policy settlement at site level. She claims that, for principals, 'this is an incredible card that we have, we can settle it to suit the children in our school'. She develops this idea by describing the very positive impact she believes that a centrally developed policy called *Teaching for Effective Learning* (TfEL) has had on both students and teachers when adapted to suit the context of Sullivan School. On the other hand, she is critical of a 'whole lot of bureaucratic things' that are poorly matched to the needs of schools, either because they are not relevant to what she sees as core teaching and learning work or because they 'are pushed through in unmanageable ways' and make unreasonable demands on principals and staff. She attributes these mismatches, at least in part, to a lack of understanding of schools amongst those making policy:

The policy is not connected to the schools at all. They have some people out there that haven't been in schools for an awful long time. Some of them have never been in schools, certainly not been principals. They have these ideas and some of them are very good, but then they have this idea that they'll give it to schools and it'll happen.

Sasha describes various ways she has resisted policies in areas such as health and safety, performance management and school accountability. For example, she describes her refusal to participate in a particular iteration of a centrally imposed accountability process:

With the self-review thing, I just refused to do it because I thought it was flawed because the rubrics were crap. I said to them, actually it was when I was at [my previous school], 'I can't put these rubrics in front of my staff. They'll just laugh at them. They're just a set of motherhood statements, and they're just impossible. You have to read sentences with 40 words in them. I'm not going to do this.'

Analysis of documents related to local processes of performance management indicates a different form of resistance. In interview, Sasha dismisses the centrally mandated policy as 'terribly flawed' and says performance management at Sullivan School, instead, uses a local policy document based on the notion of 'contributive leadership'. This local document appears to differ markedly from central policy, for example, in its emphasis on team learning, action research, innovative practice and a flat rather than hierarchical structure of administration. The development of local policy, seemingly downplayed in some other schools in this study, appears to be used by the principal at Sullivan School to both subvert broader directives and support more responsive and locally relevant practice. In the related area of managing underperforming staff, Sasha alludes to avoiding the education department's policy because it does not match the needs of the individual teacher or the school. She says it 'can bring poorly performing teachers to the door of managing poor performance procedures but is often counter-productive'. Sasha provides a specific insight into managing what she terms 'unproductive resistance':

Now dealing with resistance, what you do is you disempower. So you work to push them away and to reduce their power in the organisation. Well, that's what I do anyway and it's very, very effective. You just don't take any notice of what they say, you just push it away, you just keep holding the line ... and people will thank you because they are sick and tired of their whinging.

The circulation of power and the operation of asymmetrical power relations are evident in much of Sasha's telling of practices of resistance in policy settlement. According to Foucault (1982), these practices can work as a 'chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used' (p. 780). The assumption that the power of policy-makers typically evokes a subordinate response from principals appears to underpin a certain satisfaction Sasha takes in standing her ground and refusing to be cast, along with other principals, as an untroubled conduit of policy implementation. By founding her subjectivity, at least in part, in acts of resistance and transgression, Sasha appears to gain some freedom from discursive forms of policy dominance and to hold to an ethics she describes as 'coming from what we believe is an education worth having'.

Acts of resistance and refusal also seem to distance and differentiate Sasha somewhat from a more compliant principal community and from what Bleiker (2003) describes as 'the seductive but suffocating dangers of the herd instinct' (p. 34). It is this sense of separation that prompts Sasha to express some reservations about her principal colleagues. In explaining, during a group discussion amongst principal participants, a lack of resistance by principals to policy directives, Sasha invokes the

practice of risky truth telling or *parrēsia* which Foucault (2010) describes as ‘the courage of telling the truth to others in order to conduct them in their own conduct (p. 346). Sasha says:

The courage to speak fearlessly, why is it so scarce? Because the principals don't seem to have courage; a circular argument to be sure. If they don't have courage how can they lead? Do they not understand that their position, courageously stated, helps give staff courage to take on change and develop good (or bad as the case may be) practice?

In using this portrait to highlight Sasha's efforts to resist and subvert the discursive framing of much of her work, I am suggesting that it is possible to consider principals as more than ‘embodied appendices of various discourses’ (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 1130). While Sasha's self-styled efforts to talk back to dominant and repressive policy voices suggests an interest in resistance that exceeds that of other principal participants, it also recognises her own entanglement in power relations that are potentially productive and enabling. It is this potential for opening up spaces of freedom, choice and emancipation that sees resistance shift from off-stage and benign practices such as cynicism, humour, irony and scepticism – what Contu (2008) describes as ‘decaf resistance’ – towards practices that work beyond discursive boundaries and change relations of power that hold these boundaries in place.

Portrait: Janet – The Principal as Policy Actor and Policy Subject

Janet is principal of Caldicott School; a school of about 700 students located in a stable, affluent outer-suburban community.

Janet's input into various aspects of my fieldwork is characterised by a strong belief in the importance of school and system-wide collaboration and a capacity to sustain twin narratives about both local needs and systemic requirements. She says of her role, ‘people work during the day and paperwork at night’ to both indicate her belief in prioritising onsite collaborative opportunities as well as expediting a front-line human resource management responsibility in ways that maximise benefits to her school. She expands on this priority in interview:

It's the full level of people work, so some of it's about people planning, e.g. looking at your leadership structure for the forthcoming year or 5-year period. Or it might be drafting up the job and person's specifications for leadership vacancies or teacher vacancies that are coming up. It's a mixture of envisioning the future and doing the pragmatic work on a daily basis around putting the plan into place.

Counterpoints to Janet's commitment to local improvement and advantage are activities and practices she describes that have her enter and play a part in the discursive field of centrally developed policy. As for all of the principals in my study, it is here that prevailing policy discourses implicate Janet in complex power relations

with policy-makers and others, and it is here that the discursive frame of policy actor shapes and confines her policy work as principal. While all principals are charged with performing policy work in visible and accountable ways, Janet's interpretation of an 'as the crow flies' connection between the script of policy-makers and her performance as principal stands in contrast to the more critical and tenuous connections made by other principal participants.

Ball, Maguire, Braun and Hoskins (2011) unpack the policy work of teachers by using a typology of 'policy actors' or 'policy positions'. It could be argued that principals take up equivalent positions in the work of interpreting and enacting policy in schools, for example, those described as 'translators', 'entrepreneurs' and 'critics'. Janet's positioning as policy actor appears, from fieldwork evidence, to be more akin to that of policy 'enthusiast' (Ball et al., 2011) or perhaps, more accurately, a *willing conduit* for external policy. In support of this descriptor, Isaac, a staff member at Caldicott School, notes that Janet needs to 'be that sort of middleman with implementing policy here that is directed from above'. Similarly, Bobbi, a coordinator at the school, says, 'she gets direction from the department, of what current policies and procedures need to be, she makes sure that they are implemented, throughout the school'.

In response to a question about the need for local policy development, arising in discussion of the unique context of Caldicott School and the particular needs of its students, Janet claims:

We take state and federal government policy and departmental policy very seriously. We don't generally create school-based policies very often here anymore, because if there's a departmental policy, why would we create our own? Wherever possible, we use department policy and follow it to the letter as best we can. It's good to have as a guide.

Janet provides examples of policies to further illuminate her position:

There are all sorts of examples of [centrally-developed] policy, such as work health and safety, suspension, exclusion, student behaviour management. Where there's an absence of specific policies, so take, for example, uniform, we have a school-based policy around that, but predominantly, we work with the department's policy or federal government policy.

Janet says a reliance on externally developed policy is 'about being professional' but acknowledges that it can create a perception that she has 'a goody two-shoes' approach to policy work. This latter admission suggests that her determined compliance may be at odds with some principal colleagues.

Janet is enthusiastic about much of the policy that comes into the school from outside and is positive about the support that surrounds policy implementation in terms of professional development, helpline advice and site visits from policy experts. She says that the school uses policies such as the *Australian Curriculum* and the *National Professional Standard for Teachers* 'to ensure that what they're doing is appropriate'. Similarly, she describes local implementation of the education department's *Performance and Development Policy*, as 'really vital' and goes on to elaborate various aspects of the structures and processes derived from the policy:

So we've got quite well established processes now for performance planning. Every member of staff has a performance plan. Every member of staff's involved in performance review. They all have a line manager. All of our line managers have done training around performance and development. Part of the performance planning is about identifying professional learning needs, and working with line managers and myself to ensure that those professional learning needs are met. Feedback is purposeful, respectful, explicit, and managers can delve down deeply into design of assessment task and mapping of performance outcomes for students in terms of their results.

Interestingly, the perceptions of other staff members at Caldicott School about the systematic management of performance through external policy requirements do not necessarily accord with those expressed by Janet. Isaac identifies the pragmatic value of a written plan as 'a way in for a performance manager' to conduct a conversation about underperformance, while Mac describes an 'onerous' and 'meaningless' process of performance management 'that we do because we have to, not because we want to.' While the comparison is simplistic, these differing perceptions point to the way the designation of the principal as policy actor and the taking up of particular subjectivities by the principal may create a tendency to amplify the importance of policy and its impact on practice.

While Janet's responses to NAPLAN testing and the *MySchool* website are more muted, they do not generally go to critiquing these policies. For example, she does not try to identify their negative aspects or unintended consequences nor point to any incompatibilities between the broad requirements and aspirations of these policies and the unique local needs of the school community. Rather, Janet uses them to further advance a view that her policy work should be concerned with implementing what is required on behalf of the students of the school. Summarily, she captures this position by claiming:

We really should use policy sensibly to make sure we're doing what we're supposed to be doing in our site and the students aren't disadvantaged in any way through our own ignorance or lack of awareness about policy.

Janet reserves her criticism of externally developed policy to noting an intensification of policy demands and accountabilities in recent years. She says 'we could drown in the amount of policy that's there' and senses that 'there's been an increase in the amount of policy we're expected to (1) know about; (2) implement; and (3) implement well and then be able to provide evidence of that implementation or data, wherever appropriate'. In relation to policy proliferation, Janet also identifies the importance of 'not bombarding people with one thing after another' and being 'able to gauge the best timing for implementation of any policy'.

In reply to a question about the way she builds the reputation of the Caldicott School, Janet emphasises the tangible importance of student achievement data in providing a 'quality' narrative to the community:

Well, certainly, that our learning outcomes are sound and on an upward trajectory. I'd be very concerned if I thought our learning outcomes were declining, because right from the outset I believe that our message in the community needed to be about quality learning and support. So, our data needs to show that, and that's the story we want to tell.

This partial portrait, extracted from more complete accounts and observations about Janet's work as principal, serves to illustrate aspects of her policy work and, more generally, points to ways that principals and their work may be constituted through the discursive frames of policy actor and policy subject. In other parts of my ethnography, Janet interrupts somewhat my depiction of her as willing conduit by highlighting the way she factors in workload demands, policy timelines, policy relevance and variations in accountability requirements before deciding on the pace, extent and method of policy enactment at Caldicott School. Calvin, a governing council member at the school, captures this more nuanced approach in interview:

There are some things that head office comes out with as policy statements that she doesn't agree with and she doesn't think is in the best interest of the school but we have no option about. As the Department's representative she has to do it. She tends to find the best positives she can from it and make it as painless as possible. In any bureaucracy you disagree with some of the stuff that happens. She tries to put a positive slant on things.

I will now recommence discussion and analysis of the *paradoxes of neoliberal policy* by considering the paradoxical qualities of exhortations to excellence in contemporary schooling.

The Paradox of Excellence

In Chap. 4, the neoliberal policy discourse of excellence was linked to expectations of the principal held in the broader notion of school effectiveness and in policies that value, generate and compare its measurable indicators. The chapter described a preoccupation with continuous improvement in student achievement and the principal's attendant performative work in building the school's reputation. The power of this discourse in schools was linked to the workings of a dispositif of institutional policies, as well as the self-governance requirements of the neoliberal subject, and used to explain the constant concern of principals with promoting personal excellence, motivating others to be innovative and to produce quality outcomes and generating 'a collective corporate commitment to being the best' (Ball, 1997, p. 259). Several paradoxes derived from my field data originate from, and develop within, this excellence policy discourse.

One version of *the paradox of excellence* can be discerned in the way that exhortations by principals to quality schooling, high performance, data-driven improvement and organisational excellence may actually work to narrow and undermine these ideals. Such exhortations are backed by the need for an evidence base and an attendant focus on the collection and analysis of student achievement data from standardised, high-stakes tests. This data, and the effort of ensuring that it is trending upwards, thus, comes to function as a proxy measure of excellence for students, teachers, principals and schools. The equivalence of these connections appears, in some comments made by teachers in interview, to be relatively unproblematic. For example, Jack from Lawson School takes the current preoccupation with

measurement as more ‘a sign of the times’ than a powerful shift in the way excellence is discerned:

I remember my first year of teaching, one of my colleagues saying, ‘We should be doing things just for fun in education’. Now very much what echoes in my mind is that unless we are able to measure it, why are we doing it? Because unless we’re able to measure it, how can we see a change in success?

Oman, from McCullough School, describes the tangible link between displays of success in NAPLAN data and parental school choice:

I am sure that principals are well aware of the fact that parents make school selections probably on the basis of that data and therefore it’s probably important that that data looks really good. That’s driven by that need for success. The fact of the matter is school numbers are significantly dependent upon school performance, that’s the league table stuff coming in here is it not.

As further evidence of the hold of data-driven improvement, Serna provides a positive account of its application at Heatherbank School:

Schools are getting better and better at knowing where they’re at with data. We had a big focus on data and actually trying to analyse data and making sure that every teacher in every classroom knows and sees their kids’ achievements over that particular term. It’s shared with everybody, so there is accountability.

However, other teachers are more qualified in their convictions. Dale, from Caldicott School, dwells on the connection between data and improved teacher quality:

I think there’s certainly an increase in collection of data and data analysis and so forth, than what there was 10 years ago. Having to refer to the data more than we probably did previously... with the aim of improving teacher quality. I mean, I don’t know if you can say it definitely has improved teacher quality at this stage, but teachers do use it and reflect on it. How much that changes their practice is still to be decided.

Deeper concerns arise in the contributions of principals. For example, Sasha from Sullivan School cites international data to make the argument that the conflation of NAPLAN test scores with excellence in schools serves ‘the political function of justifying the shift of public funds to the private sector’. Belinda from Lawson School contrasts a commitment to ‘putting your energy into everyone’ with centrally sanctioned methods for lifting state-wide NAPLAN scores by focussing attention on those cohorts where the greatest improvement can be gained – which she characterises as ‘just such a poor example of raising a level and making sure the state is up there’.

Seen through a paradox lens, these interview extracts bring the prominence of current accounts of excellence based on data-informed measurement into conflict with more dispersed concerns about narrowing, corrupting and simplifying the evidence base. Tellingly, in this configuration of interrelated oppositions, the currently valued preference for using test data as a proxy for excellence can be linked to risk-averse and opportunistic responses from both teachers and leaders – for example, in well-documented ‘teach-to-the-test’ methodologies and data manipulation

strategies – that actually work against broader and more substantial notions of improvement and excellence.

The paradox of excellence is enlarged and made more complex when emphasis is shifted to the technology of standardisation on which it relies. In the pursuit of excellence, it is a technology underpinned by attempts to rein in heterogeneity across schools and to ‘reduce product variety in education’ (Morley & Rassool, 2002, p. 63). Standardisation uses a range of policy instruments to pursue aspirations associated with objective school comparisons, measured effectiveness and controlled accounts of success and failure. Perhaps the most publicly visible of these instruments in the Australian context are the common and mandated Australian Curriculum and the NAPLAN. However, much of global, national and state policy development, founded on principles of neoliberalism, works to standardise and ‘enclose’ (Slater & Griggs, 2015, p. 440) school education. Carlo, from Sullivan School, casts the standardising and enclosing effects of NAPLAN in a broader curriculum context:

Another constraint that I think that we get through policy is the ‘reading, writing, arithmetic’ constraint. I think there is a very strong voice from perhaps some more traditional and conservative parts of our community that want to constrain schools back to being places that focus on reading, writing and arithmetic as being the core of the curriculum – in a very old-fashioned and constraining way. (Carlo, Sullivan School Governing Council)

Paradoxically, in making the assumption that schooling can be reduced to a uniform set of best practices that can be applied across all settings and to all individuals, standardisation not only fails to acknowledge local diversity and the richness of local resources but also privileges narrowed learning possibilities and blunt and homogenous systems of school measurement and comparison. In short, it actively works against important aspects of the quality and excellence premise on which it is founded. In this dynamic, principals are held accountable to external conformity mandates and subject to ingenuous and unfair measures of their effectiveness.

However, in consideration of its paradoxical qualities, standardisation may also be revealed as a technology which necessitates the principal straddling authoritative performance mandates as well as local accountabilities and solutions. It may thus be cast as a site of contestation where principals shape and alter normative demands by surfacing subordinated options for advocacy, influence and resistance (see Slater & Griggs, 2015).

Another iteration of the paradox of excellence arises when the shorthand simplification and common-sense logic of calls for excellence come to count as an approximation for the school’s fulfilment of its responsibility to offer quality education for all students. The affirmative and separate logics of equity and social justice here become bound up in the hopeful rhetoric of managerialism. Teachers are urged to, and are held accountable for, improved student achievement, with concern for the vulnerabilities, needs and aspirations of individuals paradoxically subordinated to the pressing demands of summative and mandated measures of excellence. This paradox is more fully explored in the *paradox of choice and equity* which follows.

The Paradox of Choice and Equity

In my analysis of neoliberal policy discourses in Chap. 4, notions of choice and equity in education, especially in the Australian context, were shown as increasingly oppositional. On one side, choice is enshrined in the Australian system by broad public/private options and reinforced by more intricate choices amongst schools based, for example, on history, location, facilities and perceived status. Choice is favoured in biased funding arrangements and given a kind of political ‘bullet-proofing’ through its promises of improved student and school performance.

When viewed through a paradox lens, choice and equity are in an antinomial relationship where the merits of choice, and any improvements that flow to students through competition between schools, are not available to those who need them most. Choice can only be exercised by that group with the required income, mobility and postcode. As a result, the entwinement of choice with equity – including equity of access, participation and opportunity – is one which actually (and paradoxically) produces very significant *inequities* in the Australian system, with the disadvantage of students already at risk compounded by their very limited schooling options.

In my fieldwork, the local manifestations of this paradox were most clearly observed in the school promotion work of principals. For example, in ‘school of choice’ marketing campaigns, schools appeared drawn to exemplifying their best qualities and to differentiating themselves from their competitors in order to appear a more attractive choice for would-be enrolments. Positive aspects of academic performance, school specialisations and quality assurance ratings were typically highlighted in processes that arguably promote very narrow notions of quality schooling. The portrait of Imogen which follows captures both the willingness of the principal at McCullough School to embrace the choice agenda and her considerable capacity to promote the school to prospective enrolments. This portrait functions, in part, as an empirical description of what Binkley (2009) describes as ‘the practical, ethical work individuals perform on themselves in their effort to become more agentive, decisionistic, voluntaristic and vital market agents’ (p. 62).

Sasha, principal of Sullivan School, provides a particular insight into the workings of this paradox of choice and equity when she highlights how school choice, in its reliance on data-informed comparisons of schools, deliberately tries to direct attention away from the socio-economic backgrounds of students:

We should challenge the denial of the effect of socio-economic class on student achievement because that’s the neoliberal propaganda. When they claim ‘we have controlled for socio-economic factors and found it’s the teacher that makes the difference’, what exactly do they mean? There may be some mathematical tricks that you can use with the statistics to remove this and that factor; however, in the classroom these tricks cannot be used – the socio-economic background of the students is still there.

Sasha pursues this theme further, describing how a focus on data-driven improvement measures shifts the blame for under-achievement to teachers and principals:

We need to challenge the mindset that this data enables in the minds of our teachers and students. At the moment they are using this data to blame teachers and principals for lack of improvement ... to say that the principal makes the difference is a lie. Like the lie that it is the teacher that makes the difference when in actual fact it is more to do with socio-economic background. It's just another version of teacher bashing. The principal could make a difference if she leads the teachers to reject the learning theories and teaching practices which reproduce the power relations that ensure the status quo.

This discussion appears to open the way for new deliberations on the complexities inherent in relations between principal/teacher quality and student learning. It further suggests new work in (re)instating socially just and equitable classroom and leadership practices in the face of homogeneous systemic requirements for growth and achievement. In terms of shaping the principal subject, *the paradox of choice and equity* raises the possibility of multiple affiliations and an associated plurality of subject positions. It highlights how the discursive construction of school choice exposes the apparent fixity of its meaning to more critical and dispersed interpretations. Berkhout (2007) describes how this discursive construction ‘opens up a critical creative space for school leaders to engage with competing discourses and narratives, in the interest of social justice and transformation, and to engage with what is vying for privilege’ (p. 411).

Aligning *the paradox of choice and equity* with Berkhout’s ‘creative space’ suggests, for principals, differently oriented work on the self as they seek to alleviate, mollify, vary and resist the effects of the market-oriented choice discourse. More productively, it opens new constitutive possibilities that reside in the contingency and variability of the process of their neoliberalisation. This is not to imagine the principal as unencumbered ‘social justice leader’ (DeMatthews, Mungal, & Carrola, 2015) or as fighting for equity beyond the reach of discourses of choice, marketisation and competition. Rather, it is to (i) position principals as subjects who can access and invigilate versions of themselves that rearticulate, interrupt and resist vivid and pressing neoliberal representations and (ii) privilege that aspect of principal practice that DeMatthews et al. (2015) describe as an ‘ongoing struggle’ focussed ‘on the day-to-day realities of creating more socially just schools in inequitable societies’ (pp. 18–19).

Portrait: Imogen – The Principal as Enterprising Subject

Imogen is the principal at McCullough School, a secondary school of about 600 students located in a suburban community and in close proximity to several other state and private secondary schools. McCullough School serves a local community characterised by significant variations in family income, but with a high percentage of students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Imogen is in her first tenure as principal. In conversation, she makes several references to being relatively new in the job and to the way she is shaping a particular identity for herself as principal. The notion of ‘the enterprising subject’ appears to

function not only as an easy descriptor of Imogen's attitude and approach but also as an insistent and influential discursive force exhorting Imogen to get the best out of herself and to showing McCullough School in the best possible light.

In interview, Imogen immediately declares her enthusiasm for the role:

I consider being principal of the school to be an exhilarating experience. It's fun. It can be very challenging, daunting, time consuming, but, generally, it's a really exciting opportunity. So I do enjoy it.

Observations of Imogen's demeanour in her many interactions with staff, students and community members further support her claims of enthusiasm and exhilaration. In these interactions, she seems unfailingly positive, ready to engage at a detailed level and keen to provide support and validation when others solicit it. She displays a capacity to 'think on her feet' as she deals with multiple requests and responds to a variety of issues. For example, during an early morning conversation, a staff member puts her head in the door to provide an update on a programme she is coordinating. Imogen is immediately attentive and asks questions that indicate her deep interest in, and understanding of, the programme. After the staff member has departed, Imogen shares with me her understanding of the political dimension of this type of exchange and her surprise in realising the importance that staff attach to being affirmed by the principal.

In the accumulation of data and information at McCullough School, Imogen comes across consistently as a principal who is enterprising, agile and impressive. However, beyond the descriptive force of these qualities, there is also evidence of their function as discursive influences and constraints on Imogen's identity and work as principal. Imogen's construction as an enterprising subject appears to originate from her own efforts 'to *add* value to the self and *find ways* of productive inclusion' (Simons & Masschelein, 2008, p. 54, italics in original) as well as the external pressures of policy and public expectations.

She describes deliberate and self-conscious work in shaping her leadership identity and in exercising positional power and self-responsibility. She makes reference to being 'a leader of the leaders' and 'a coach, a mentor, an influencer, a supporter' and describes in detail personal choices made to lead the professional learning of staff and 'to be visible' and 'adopt an open-door policy'. These choices are tempered by performative work in 'trying to put on a bright face the next day' while remaining concerned about not having enough energy 'to be there for staff' and needing to counter a feeling of being 'overwhelmed'. She describes her current self-improvement effort:

You'll notice this week I'm on a liquid diet, part of my detox and the water and so on. Next week, it will be beautiful food and trying to fit in a little bit of a fitness regime. I didn't do that before. What it means is that I'm not taking as much work home. I've made a deliberate ... I'll work through lunch and recess at school, but that's when staff come and see me as well, so I do try to pop into the staff room more, so I'm making a conscious effort around that.

Imogen also notes, with some surprise, the apparent 'power of the principal just saying something' and illustrates how, in noticing the efficacy of remarks made at a

staff meeting about her personal preferences for staff dress codes, she gained the confidence to state the changes she wanted all staff to make to their clothing choices.

When considered in the context of neoliberal governmentality, Imogen's work as enterprising subject can be seen as a determined effort to optimise and entrepreneurialise herself and her conduct. For example, her efforts to corral issues of student wellbeing and community engagement into programmatic solutions signify her desire to be entrepreneurial – to embrace current trends and to invent new and innovative solutions to problems that appear persistent and deep-seated. While these programmes are referenced in several places in interviews and school documents, they appear to function as banner headings and as proof of action, with matters of their worth and compatibility absent from any input. These performative and impression management qualities of Imogen's work extend beyond programmatic solutions, appearing to be most commonly linked to the issue of maintaining and increasing the student enrolments at McCullough School.

Imogen construes several aspects of the school's appearance, performance and organisation as responses to the declining enrolments in feeder schools and competition from neighbouring state and private schools. Interview input, observation and document analysis all speak strongly to fundamental neoliberal tenets of choice and competition. She welcomes the community feedback relayed by her line manager that McCullough School 'is the desirable school of choice ... within the community' and goes on to connect the impact of a major building development currently underway to new possibilities for increasing enrolments. Her enthusiasm for this impression management work is further illustrated by her description of the interaction of her school with local primary schools:

We're also going to be going into all of our local primary schools. We're doing it this term with our music program, but it's really too late. We're going to have a music program going into all of the schools next year. I'm looking for sharing some of our staff within our local primary schools as well. We are collaborating with our closest primary school down the road in a significant joint project. We've got a whole lot of things like that.

Other members of staff and Governing Council make more direct links between an impressive school and the viability of student enrolments, with several referring to how Imogen is positioned in this dynamic. Charlie and Leah from the Governing Council highlight Imogen's work in marketing and promotion:

Charlie: *It's a selling point and Imogen will unashamedly use the redevelopment of our science and technology resource centre, and the new art centre ... she will unashamedly promote that use through the region as a selling point.*

Leah: *She's very strong in marketing. Our principal is. That's a big focus for her ... She is very directly involved in uniform changes, the development of the school, the grounds.*

In casual conversation as well as formal interviews, members of staff express a range of views on the principal's work in impression management. Samantha, a school business manager, makes reference to how successive principals have insisted on a particular dress code, saying 'they look at the teachers and staff and how they're dressed. Let me tell you, they make comments to us'. Oman, a senior

leader, says that principals are acutely aware that parents make a choice of school for their child based on data so it is ‘important that the data looks really good’. Oman also describes the principal’s recent filling of an ‘image consultant’ position at McCullough School as symptomatic of the business orientation of schools and a matter over which staff are divided. Imogen is unequivocal in her support of the position that she describes more broadly as ‘promotions person’. In interview, she expands on the responsibilities of the position by describing photographic, web development and publication work that is connected to the rebranding of McCullough School and to selective highlighting of its best features and achievements.

As an enterprising principal subject, Imogen positions herself, and is positioned by others, as the leader of this impression management work. Matters of school choice, competition and enrolment share are taken by Imogen and many teacher and community colleagues to be unproblematic or are construed as bracing challenges and useful measures of principal effectiveness. The performative work of the principal is central to these arrangements. In the context of McCullough School, Imogen’s considerable capacity to promote a particular view of the school to the public, manage how the school is portrayed in the media and counter and downplay negative perceptions is widely noted and admired by those she works with.

The Paradox of Principal Autonomy

Under the managerialist leadership preferences of neoliberalism (see Chap. 8), principal autonomy flows from the decentralisation of decision-making in matters such as staffing, planning and school structures. The expounded logic is, following Berkhout (2007), ‘fundamentally shaped by the neo-liberalist discourse of the free market and the power of autonomous agents’ (p. 411), and it submits that these matters, managed at school level, better respond to local accountabilities and produce outcomes that are more compatible with the specific needs of the community and the school’s potential enrolment market. As Morley and Rassool (2002) note, ‘responsibility is devolved and increased responsiveness to clients/customers is alleged’ (p. 62). When rendered paradoxically, the type of principal autonomy attached to the neoliberal policy project can be shown to have fabricated and deceptive qualities.

One of the ironies in granting apparent autonomies to principals – which has occurred in various diminished and expanded iterations in the system within which my study is situated – is that it has coincided with an extended period of unprecedented scrutiny and surveillance of schools from the central office and its agencies. Felicity from Sullivan School notes this trend and its potential to interfere with local priorities:

I think now is a particularly interesting time to be observing what appears to be a move towards more hierarchical models coming out of our corporate office as well as some of the approaches which seem to be more around accountability than supportive of creativity and innovation. I think we’ve gone for, you know, reasons that we currently understand, towards

this model where actually all of a sudden it's about standards, it's about checking boxes, it's about being accountable and it's about answering to data and making sure we've got all of that. Some of that I think could, if you let it, if the principal let it, could actually drive the school in a particular direction.

In this reading, the autonomy conferred on principals from above is accompanied by the authoritative gaze of supervisors and a kind of mock empowerment that is bounded by systemic requirements for alignment and conformity (see Wright, 2012). Other non-principal participants in my research appeared awake to the positioning of the principal in these hierarchical arrangements.

Darius, from Lawson School, says:

Sometimes principals become figureheads of the school and it's, I guess, the absolute-ness of it ... people's interpretation of our principal as an absolute authority, they're where the buck stops. When in fact, the buck stops further up the food chain. There's a whole network above that and a network above that.

Along similar lines, Angela from Heatherbank School talks about 'people further up the food chain' from principals 'dictating to them what they can do, so that they are just hamstrung in doing anything other than what's expected of them'.

Paradoxically, the ostensible divestment of new powers to the principal and alleged improvements in responsiveness to communities and customers is more likely, in this dynamic, to manifest in performative responses that cater more to the generic policy priorities of the system than to local needs. This 'steering from a distance' uses neoliberal technologies, such as centrally imposed standards and accountability regimes, to affect a fundamental reworking of relations of power, where the prima facie appearance of autonomy arguably disguises the apportioning of greater powers centrally.

Several research participants highlighted in interview the various deceptions in suggestions the principal can be rendered more autonomous in a policy environment marked by increased accountability and surveillance:

As principal, a part of doing the job well is being seen to be doing the job well because of the huge amount of accountability as a principal leading a school and student learning. I don't believe that you can separate them. (Belinda, principal, Lawson School)

It becomes the department leading the school by talking to other people beyond the school about what happens in the school. (Frank, Heatherbank School)

In the current climate principals don't want to have done something that they shouldn't have done, or spoken out of turn, or given information to the wrong people, or done it too quickly or too slowly. (Richard, Lawson School)

We get locked into a system of external accountability and once we are focusing all your energy on accountability we actually lose the ability to do creativity and innovation. We stymie everything because we've got so many rules around everything we actually stymie it. I think I've seen a real shift in the last 20 or 30 years towards that accountability piece. (Felicity, Sullivan School)

Local consequences of this partial and contingent granting of principal autonomy, noted in my fieldwork, relate to the under-resourcing of areas of increased school responsibility; the need to devise new structures at school level, especially in the

configuration of leadership teams; and the increased pressure and workload on principals. In the following two extracts, Oman, from McCullough School, observes specific examples of the pressures that confound notions of principal autonomy.

The fact that performance policy has been nailed so closely undermines to some degree the authority of the principal. I think what that does is makes the principal a focus for those negative feelings towards performance management, that's unfair given that it's directed from on high.

Over the years I reckon more and more tasks have been stuck on principal's shoulders. What's been happening, in the past few experiences I have had, is that principals live behind closed doors, they're busy working on finance, they're busy working on human resource management, they're busy working on those difficult tasks that none of us want to do.

In the more general layering of principal responsibility that 'autonomy' demands, Oman's insights also work in concert with Nietzsche's (2014) interpretation of principal leadership, as 'a tactic of governmentality in the governing of education at a distance' (p. 144). These consequences of autonomy run contrary to centrally sanctioned objectives about greater principal freedom and add weight to accounts given by principal participants of increased complexity and workload and more thorough surveillance.

A more intimate expression of the paradox of principal autonomy can be derived from the performative work that principals do on themselves in manufacturing an authentic persona (see Guthey & Jackson, 2005) of an autonomous school leader. While elements of the heroic or saviour leader that marbled historical and contemporary accounts were sometimes detected in my ethnographic data (and are expressed through several of the principal portraits), this identity work is more directly focussed on neoliberal ideas about individual enterprise, self-possession and leader centrality. Paradoxically, performances of the autonomous self, when subject to the discourses of neoliberalism, are rendered impossible by expectations of conformance to specific norms of success as measured by pervasive accountability regimes and performance evaluations (Sinclair, 2011, p. 508). Additionally, this work, when seen as an act of performance, brings with it 'connotations of non-essentialism, transience, versatility and masquerade' (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 33) and, in doing so, interrupts idealised accounts of the authentic, agential and autonomous principal.

In the politics of principal subjectivity, the neoliberal brand of governmentality renders autonomy a necessary corollary to the qualified freedoms bestowed on subjects. This arrangement prompts Rossi (2017), drawing on Foucault's work on subjectivity and power, to speculate on the possibility that 'individual freedom is nothing but a chimera projected by modern apparatuses of subjection' and that 'agency', therefore, might 'only appear as a by-product and spectre of coercion' (p. 339).

The paradox of principal autonomy infers, in its various oppositions, a different plane on which the politics of the self and principal autonomy might coincide. This is not to invoke the possibility of 'an independent subject that stands outside of

society or power relations' (Allen, 2011, p. 44), but, rather, to suggest the availability of a version of principal autonomy that is inclusive of the capacity of the principals to think critically about their subjectivity and the constitutive effects of the power-knowledge relations that are manifested in dominant discourses. I further contend that a paradox lens, in locating autonomy in a less encumbered space of freedom, allows in what Ball (2015) describes as a 'sort of agonism' as a 'going beyond', where principal subjects experiment with limits and transgression, 'thinking about how one is now and how one might be different' (p. 1136).

The Paradox of Professionalism

Principal professionalism takes on new and distinct qualities under discourses of neoliberalism and, I contend, creates an important paradox that directly impacts the constitution of principals and their work. As a preferred subjectivity of neoliberal discourse, principals are called upon to be enterprising and entrepreneurial – to shape themselves according to its policy requirements (see Chap. 4). This performative quality gives new meaning to the notion of principal professionalism. It draws on and legitimises the process and technical and strategic knowledge powerfully installed by the various technologies of neoliberal policy and, in doing so, illustrates what Clarke and Moore (2013) term 'neoliberalism's deep-seated distrust of professionalism' (p. 488). It finds in prescriptive and narrow performance processes new possibilities for expertise and responsibility (see Ball, 2013; Rose, 1996) and responds to expectations that principals produce evidence that they are getting the most out of themselves and those under their 'administrative gaze' (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998, p. 333).

Under these conditions, instead of applying their own expertise and judgement to professional matters of competence and capability, principals are drawn to an opportunist scanning of the knowledge field to find where personal and school productivity can best be enhanced. Built on discourses of enterprise, competition and efficiency, this 'new' professionalism can be cast in a paradoxical relationship with an apparent reduction in the breadth, originality and contextual sensitivity of the professional work that principals actually undertake. The words of philosopher and theorist Jean-François Lyotard (1984) resonate strongly when he says, 'the goal is no longer truth, but performativity – that is, the best possible input/output equation' (p. 46).

The outside construction of an edifice of principal professionalism is further enhanced by the codification of competencies and conduct expected of principals. Most notable in the Australian context is the development of the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* (AITSL 2015) – or *The Standard* – which describes itself as 'a public statement which sets out what principals are expected to know, understand and do to achieve in their work' (p. 3). The Standard is underpinned by a generic matrix of 'leadership requirements' and 'professional practices' and pays only fleeting attention to contextual variables. Moreover, its reductive

orientation leaves out the emotional, political and contestable complexities of the actual work of principals. As Fitzgerald and Savage (2013) claim, in summary:

This is no less than a carefully constructed script in which the actors (teachers and school leaders) must perform according to the prescribed set of rituals and routines. Wholly absent is any recognition of the complex, messy and contested environment of schools and school leadership. (p. 130)

In my fieldwork, a more visceral and personal version of this paradox was observed in the disappointment and disillusionment of several principals about a centralised policy agenda in which they had performed and invested so heavily. For example, principal participants referenced the de-professionalising effects of an increased reliance on narrow measures of school effectiveness and improvement, a propensity to access professional development from outside ‘experts’, mandated programmes directed to improving literacy and numeracy and the aforementioned ‘partnerships’ policy initiative. Interpreted paradoxically, a policy agenda which suggests quantifiable, autonomous, publicly robust and enhanced levels of principal professionalism may, more likely, return a more mechanistic, amoral and cynical interpretation of what principals are required to do in the name of professionalism.

The practical manifestation of a form of professionalism that trades practice wisdom, professional judgement and personal creativity and passion for a more singular and homogenising third-party rendition was most obviously noted in systems of performance management/development in which principals participate. Here, professionalism was considered to be scaled to individual evaluation, with the principal typically subjected to various iterations of performance management and appraisal where easy compliance involved performing to reductive signifiers and prescriptive standards. The paradoxical quality of this work emerges from the performative gilding and selecting of information by principals that works to undermine rather than fulfil the objectives of the process. A duplication, at teacher level, of this tendency to performativity is described in the *paradox of strategic planning* in the next chapter.

Analysis and Conclusion

The *paradoxes of neoliberal policy* traverse a complex terrain of subjectivity and agency in principal policy work. As such, they provoke possibilities for picking out idealised types of principals such as *policy advocate*, *policy entrepreneur*, *policy interrogator*, etc. While I resist inventing such a typology, one broad conclusion that can be drawn from the use of a paradox lens in this chapter is that it presents principals with an array of responses that are not available in normative expectations about their policy work.

Arguably the most productive of the paradoxes is *the paradox of policy implementation* which opens a promising space of creativity and imagination as principals translate centrally developed policy to fit local needs. Importantly, as various of

the principal portraits show, the pressures and logics of policy are felt and treated differently by individual principals and are enacted in multiple and heterogeneous circumstances that produce ‘specific forms of indeterminacy’ (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 57). While these observations prompt a wondering about the inherent disparities in principal neoliberalisation and the unreliability of principal agency, they also emphasise the importance of dwelling in the translation space that principals occupy as policy actors. Concomitantly, in this space there is a need to speculate on the choices that principals make, and those that they refuse, and to remain attentive to what Clarke et al. (2015) describe as ‘the political and ethical issues at stake in translation’ (p. 57).

The variegated work of policy translation was illuminated in this chapter by the portraits of three of the principals in my study, Sasha, Janet and Imogen. The portraits of the other two principals in my study, included in the previous and next chapters, add additional breadth to principal policy responses. Drawing on Dyrberg (2016), one way of thinking about this variation is to consider the determination of individual principals to make certain ‘exclusions’ in order ‘to carve out the political field’ (p. 268) of policy enactment at school level. This work can be interpreted as a form of counter-conduct directed to making the space for the requisite freedoms needed if policy is to be settled in the school’s favour. The types of exclusions that can be discerned from the principal portraits – and which are most fully illustrated in Sasha’s portrait – include rejecting the immutability of centrally developed policy and the hierarchical chain of command along which it passes and refuting any notion that those higher on the ladder might possess more expert policy knowledge than those enacting it on the ground. Sasha complements these types of exclusions by deliberately characterising centralised policy as abstract and homogenous in order to suggest the impossibility of it fitting the needs of her school, thus providing her with a mandate to change it.

The paradox of policy implementation opens a space of translation where principal practices can resist, change and manoeuvre centrally mandated reforms. The other paradoxes in this chapter, with their origins in the ruling policy discourses of neoliberalism, work into this space to show how the warrior topos language of paradox might render these seemingly bullet-proof reforms more fragile and contingent. Bainton’s (2015) notion of ‘liminal slippage’ is useful here. It describes how this space of policy translation is created by shifts in context, language and meaning, so that translation of policy can become ‘a struggle that opens up the potential for alternatives’ (p. 169).

The paradoxes of *excellence, choice and equity, principal autonomy and professionalism*, while founded on a tangible shift in context from their site of development to that of their implementation, also highlight the potential for the language of paradox – as warrior topos – to work liminally in support of alternative interpretations of meaning and to help counter and refute dominant policy messages. Clarke et al. (2015) assert the importance of language in the work of policy translation:

rather than translation being deterministic and unidirectional, translation should also be understood as contested, and, as such, translation inevitably includes the possibility of

retranslation, of redefining and resisting, of ‘talking back’ to dominant understandings, or taking back the possibility of self-naming. (p. 40)

The language of paradox tests the epistemological qualities of truth claims made in policy. It provides a resource for interrupting the taken-for-granted quality of these claims by articulating the form of simultaneous and interrelated opposites. It finds in these opposites new meaning and different ways of knowing beyond and against those officially sanctioned and implies, in practices of the self, what Foucault (2000) describes as ‘a set of truth obligations’ involving ‘discovering the truth, being enlightened by truth, telling the truth’ (p. 177–8).

From this reading, it appears that paradox language makes available to principals, as policy actors, a way of accessing what De Lissovoy (2016) call their ‘epistemological agency’ (p. 132) by supporting them to talk about and talk back to the truth claims in policy. Prima facie, a fairer and more open-ended contest is suggested. However, this assertion is tempered by the formidable difficulties involved in mobilising *theoretical resources* for a political struggle as *tactical practices* for resisting the entreaties of policy. Phillips (2006), in deliberating on ‘subjectivity as a resource for resistance’, draws from Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) to suggest that ‘strategies of power are opposed by the tactics of resistance available to those who are not provided a proper place of power’ (p. 319). Applying this power imbalance to the relations of policy-makers and principals helps to underscore the risk involved for principals embarking on tactics of resistance, such as the practices of critique and counter-conduct introduced in Chap. 5. Phillips (2006) is awake to these risks when he describes the consequences of ‘speaking out of place’:

given one’s position one is entitled to speak in certain ways and about certain things, but also limited in these regards. Performing within the bounds of one’s subject position provides for certain levels of social rewards, at the very least the lack of censure or disciplining, while the violation of the bounds of decorum which surround one’s position can lead to various forms of social punishment. Perhaps the greatest danger in violating one’s position is the possibility of exclusion and, therefore, a kind of social death. (p. 316)

The various illuminations of agentic practice, resistance and risk provided by the *paradoxes of neoliberal policy* encourage me to conclude this analysis with some observations about the political and ethical issues at stake in principal policy work. Two key concepts – *agonism* and *ethics* – are now applied in the policy context and flagged for a more comprehensive treatment in Chap. 8.

Firstly, I assert the importance of agonism as a preferred form of thought and practice in principal policy work. The argument for agonism, introduced in a section on *agnostic practices* in Chap. 5, is centred on its capacity to emphasise both the inevitability and importance of conflicts and confrontations in political activity. Its positive presence in this discussion of principals and policy can be linked to the capacity of the paradoxes in this chapter to reveal spaces of freedom, however small, afforded principals in the relations of power and to realise the value of holding the

different sides of the conflicts depicted open to scrutiny. In particular, *the paradox of policy implementation* shows there is always a certain ‘room for manoeuvre’ in relation to structures of power and domination in political relations and reveals the possibility of ‘a vast terrain of hidden scripts and arts of resistance’ (Owen & Tully, 2007, p. 285). Principal practices of embracing reasonable disagreement and participating in more open and unencumbered contests appear as more palpable in these spaces of freedom.

The case for principal practices of agonistic thought and resistance also rests on whether it constitutes a meaningful alternative to current preferences for top-down decision-making and the forced consensus this imposes on principals via its inherent imbalance of power. This is an argument for holding open a plurality of positions, including those represented in principal opinion, rather than seeking binding decisions founded in the expertise of policy-makers. Several implications follow. For example, a preference for agonism opens the case for systems and structures of institutional decision-making that are more conducive to dissenting opinions; it suggests a need for greater principal participation in decisions about policy and underlines the importance of collective principal voice in representations to policy-makers. Perhaps more importantly, in the scaffolding of any take up of agonistic thought and resistance by principals, is the prerequisite presence of what Tambakaki (2011) describes as a ‘critical ethos or attitude towards ... politics’ which ‘begins to resist, disturb and contest that which appears natural, hegemonic or final – be it rules, narratives, directorates or policies’ (p. 575).

Secondly, I claim the ‘dynamic and continuing activity’ of ethics (Niesche & Haase, 2012, p. 277) as central to this discussion of paradox and principal policy practice. Case, French and Simpson (2011) describe an era where ‘scientific’ and ‘value-free’ methods feed positivistic knowledge about what is required of leaders. As a result, they claim leaders are ensnared by ‘a utilitarian matrix of reasoning’ and ethics is reduced ‘to a matter of quantitative calculation’ (p. 247). Given expression in abstract normative codes of conduct, ethics within the neoliberal project is a set of expected behaviours, competencies and attitudes, bounded by points of transgression and championed for their punitive possibilities and ‘line in the sand’ functionality. As Sasha, principal of Sullivan School, says of ‘those who white-ant out the back ... you could probably get them on the code of conduct’. Following Alvesson and Willmott (2012), normalised codification of ethics fits easily with the smooth, ‘neutral techniques’ of managerialism ‘that guide and empower individual employees to work more effectively’ without any direct reference to the moral commitments and ambiguities running through this work (p. 37).

Against this tendency to codification and boundary setting of expectations and requirements, I propose a different ethics. In the essay *What is enlightenment?*, Foucault (1984) invokes and connects the ideas of freedom and reflexivity when proposing a ‘critical ontology of ourselves’. Organised along axes of knowledge, power and ethics, this is a mode of critique:

conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (p. 50)

By invoking this ‘critical ontology of ourselves’, I surface a theme that gains prominence over the remainder of this book about the more active involvement of principals in authoring their ethical selves. Using Foucault’s (1987) description of ethics as ‘the deliberate form assumed by liberty’ (p. 115), I seek to fashion spaces of freedom in which ethico-political responsibility can be returned to depleted neo-liberal readings, practices of critique and counter-conduct can be entertained and enacted and the thwarting of principal ‘freedom to choose oneself’ (Pignatelli, 2002, p. 164) can be arrested.

This involves, in the first instance, highlighting to principals the defining and delimiting functions of current policy and the possibilities, in an ethical project of elaborating the self through practices of freedom, for thinking otherwise about their constitution as policy actors and policy subjects. Such a project involves what Demetriou (2016) describes as ‘a constant reflection, rethinking and negotiation of the power that underlies everyday encounters’ (p. 219) and that Pignatelli (2002) elaborates further as ‘envision(ing) one’s self constitution as an ongoing task, an achievement requiring artistry in the face of the looming, omnipresent threats to our freedom to invent ourselves’ (p. 165). Beyond these more introspective qualities, it is also an ethics that takes seriously the consistent theme in my own research of the principal as influential in describing the culture and setting the direction of her/his school and in informing, supporting and shaping the work of others. Taking account of this influence requires that the critical consciousness developed by principals through a focus on the self be turned to a more public demonstration of their productive struggle against oppressive reforms and performative expectations (Cohen, 2014, p. 2).

When Dean (2010) notes ‘that practices of the self can be not only instruments in the pursuit of political, social and economic goals but also means of resistance to other forms of government’ (p. 21), he prompts a connection between an ethics based on an elaboration of the self and practices of counter-conduct. These practices, which Davidson (2011) claims ‘add an explicitly ethical component to the notion of resistance’ (p. 28), have been variously depicted in the paradoxes and portraits in this chapter, for example, as protests and complaints directed at certain policy initiatives, risk-taking in acts of disobedience and refusal and developing and sharing of perspectives that counter and defy the entreaties of dominant policy discourses. However, these counter-conducts were also often noted as dispersed, rhetorical and intermittent, emphasising their contingency and fragility in the face of imposing oppositions and formidable risks. In response, the pursuit of the theme of ethics turns, in the next chapter, to a more robust treatment of agonistic resistance by exploring its implications for principal practice – both the detachment of practice from currently favoured subjectivities and the possibilities for the production and performance of other ways of being (and being governed). The concluding chapter speculates on the new possibilities emerging from this book that support the formulation of a broader ethico-political project for principals.

The epistemological contributions of the paradoxes in this chapter are complemented by an extension of the discussion, commenced in Chap. 6, about freeing principals from the conditions of neoliberalism and the political power exerted on

their being. This chapter has provided a context for these ontological concerns in the policy influences that advance a neoliberal conception of the principal subject. It has also revealed the sporadic presence of qualities of risk and refusal that appear necessary to the aforementioned confrontation of the normative and the ethical (see Ball, 2015; Pignatelli, 2002). In Chap. 8, the *paradoxes of managerialist practice* shed further light on this confrontation by showing how the normative reach of the neoliberal project into everyday practice involves principals acting out a prescribed version of leadership that both obscures the politics of struggle and renders the necessary ‘techniques of the self’¹ (Foucault, 1997, p. 154) – such as risk and refusal – as fraught and difficult to access. It is the themes of enclosure, censure and acquiescence suggested by these paradoxes that prompt a renewed emphasis, in the conclusion of Chap. 8, on the productive possibilities in agonistic thought and practice and on subjectivity as a possible site of resistance.

References

- AITSL. (2015). *Australian professional standard for principals*. Retrieved from www.aitsl.edu.au/lead-develop/understand-the-principal-standard
- Allen, A. (2011). Foucault and the politics of our selves. *History of the Human Sciences*, 24(4), 43–59.
- Alvesson, M., & Kärreman, D. (2011). Decolonizing discourse: Critical reflections on organizational discourse analysis. *Human Relations*, 64(9), 1121–1146.
- Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (2012). *Making sense of management: A critical introduction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Anderson, G. L., & Grinberg, J. (1998). Educational administration as a disciplinary practice: Appropriating Foucault’s view of power, discourse, and method. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 34(3), 329–353.
- Bainton, D. (2015). Translating education: Assembling ways of knowing otherwise. In *Making policy move: Towards a politics of translation and assemblage* (pp. 157–185). Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Ball, S. J. (1994). *Education reform: A critical and post-structural approach*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Ball, S. J. (1997). Policy sociology and critical social research: A personal review of recent education policy and policy research. *British Educational Research Journal*, 23(3), 257–274.
- Ball, S. J. (2013). *Foucault, power, and education*. New York: Routledge.
- Ball, S. J. (2015). Subjectivity as a site of struggle: Refusing neoliberalism? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37(8), 1129–1146.
- Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., Braun, A., & Hoskins, K. (2011). Policy actors: Doing policy work in schools. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(4), 625–639.
- Bates, A. (2013). Transcending systems thinking in education reform: Implications for policy-makers and school leaders. *Journal of Education Policy*, 28(1), 38–54.
- Benwell, B., & Stokoe, E. (2006). *Discourse and identity*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.

¹Foucault generally refers to ‘technologies’ and ‘techniques’ of the self interchangeably. The distinction suggested here, which is one that is sometimes also evident in Foucault’s work, is to use ‘techniques’ to refer to more specific and localised practices (see O’Farrell, 2007).

- Berkhout, S. (2007). Leadership in education transformation as reshaping the organisational discourse. *South African Journal of Education*, 27(3), 407–419.
- Binkley, S. (2009). The work of neoliberal governmentality: Temporality and ethical substance in the tale of two dads. *Foucault Studies*, 6, 60–78.
- Bleiker, R. (2003). Discourse and human agency. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 2(1), 25–47.
- Butler, J. (1997). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Carpenter, B. W., & Brewer, C. (2014). The implicated advocate: The discursive construction of the democratic practices of school principals in the USA. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 35(2), 294–306.
- Case, P., French, R., & Simpson, P. (2011). Philosophy of leadership. In A. Bryman, D. Collinson, K. Grint, B. Jackson, & M. Uhl-Bien (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of leadership* (pp. 242–252). London: Sage.
- Clarke, J., Bainton, D., Lendvai, N., & Stubbs, P. (2015). *Making policy move: Towards a politics of translation and assemblage*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Clarke, M. (2013). Terror/enjoyment: Performativity, resistance and the teacher's psyche. *London Review of Education*, 11(3), 229–238.
- Clarke, M., & Moore, A. (2013). Professional standards, teacher identities and an ethics of singularity. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(4), 487–500.
- Cohen, M. I. (2014). 'In the back of our minds always': Reflexivity as resistance for the performing principal. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 17(1), 1–22.
- Contu, A. (2008). Decaf resistance on misbehavior, cynicism, and desire in liberal workplaces. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 21(3), 364–379.
- Davidson, A. I. (2011). In praise of counter-conduct. *History of the Human Sciences*, 24(4), 25–41.
- De Lissvooy, N. (2016). *Education and emancipation in the neoliberal era: Being, teaching, and power*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dean, M. (2010). *Governmentality: Power and rule in modern society* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Death, C. (2016). Counter-conducts as a mode of resistance: Ways of "not being like that" in South Africa. *Global Society*, 30(2), 201–217.
- DeMatthews, D. E., Mungal, A. S., & Carrola, P. A. (2015). Despite best intentions: A critical analysis of social justice leadership and decision making. *Administrative Issues Journal*, 5(2), 3.
- Demetriou, O. (2016). Counter-conduct and the everyday: Anthropological engagements with philosophy. *Global Society*, 30(2), 218–237.
- Dyrberg, T. B. (2016). Foucault on parrhesia: The autonomy of politics and democracy. *Political Theory*, 44(2), 265–288.
- Fitzgerald, T., & Savage, J. (2013). Scripting, ritualising and performing leadership: Interrogating recent policy developments in Australia. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 45(2), 126–143.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 777–795.
- Foucault, M. (1984). What is enlightenment? In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault reader* (pp. 32–50). New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1987). The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom: An interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 12(2–3), 112–131.
- Foucault, M. (1997). Subjectivity and truth. In S. Lotringer (Ed.), *The politics of truth* (pp. 147–168). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Foucault, M. (2000). Sexuality and solitude (R. a. o. Hurley, Trans.). In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth* (pp. 175–184). London: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (2010). *The government of self and others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983* (G. Burchell, Trans.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Guthey, E., & Jackson, B. (2005). CEO portraits and the authenticity paradox. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(5), 1057–1082.

- Hunter, I. (1994). *Rethinking the school: Subjectivity, bureaucracy, criticism*. Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Morley, L., & Rassool, N. (2002). *School effectiveness: Fracturing the discourse*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Niesche, R. (2014). Deploying educational leadership as a form of governmentality. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 35(1), 143–150.
- Niesche, R., & Haase, M. (2012). Emotions and ethics: A Foucauldian framework for becoming an ethical educator. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 44(3), 276–288.
- O'Farrell, C. (2007). Key concepts. Retrieved from <http://www.michel-foucault.com/concepts/>
- Owen, D., & Tully, J. (2007). Redistribution and recognition: Two approaches. In A. S. Laden & D. Owen (Eds.), *Multiculturalism and political theory* (pp. 265–291). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Peck, J., & Tickell, A. (2002). Neoliberalizing space. *Antipode*, 34(3), 380–404.
- Phillips, K. R. (2006). Rhetorical maneuvers: Subjectivity, power, and resistance. *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 39(4), 310–332.
- Pignatelli, F. (2002). Mapping the terrain of a Foucauldian ethics: A response to the surveillance of schooling. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 21(2), 157–180.
- Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (2009). *Globalizing education policy*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Rose, N. (1996). Governing 'advanced' liberal democracies. In A. Sharma & A. Gupta (Eds.), *The anthropology of the state: A reader* (pp. 144–161). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Rossi, A. (2017). Foucault, critique, subjectivity. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 21(4), 337–350.
- Simons, M., & Masschelein, J. (2008). Our 'will to learn' and the assemblage of a learning apparatus. In A. Fejes & K. Nicoll (Eds.), *Foucault and lifelong learning: Governing the subject* (pp. 48–60). New York: Routledge.
- Sinclair, A. (2011). Being leaders: Identity and identity work in leadership. In A. Bryman, D. Collinson, K. Grint, B. Jackson, & M. Uhl-Bien (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of leadership* (pp. 508–517). London: Sage.
- Slater, G. B., & Griggs, C. B. (2015). Standardization and subjection: An autonomist critique of neoliberal school reform. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 37(5), 438–459.
- Springer, S. (2012). Neoliberalism as discourse: Between Foucauldian political economy and Marxian poststructuralism. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 9(2), 133–147.
- Tambakaki, P. (2011). Agonism and the reconception of European citizenship. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 13(4), 567–585.
- Webb, P. T. (2014). Policy problematization. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(3), 364–376.
- Wright, A. (2012). Fantasies of empowerment: Mapping neoliberal discourse in the coalition government's schools policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, 27(3), 279–294.