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Policy enactment and leader agency: The discursive shaping of political change

Abstract

This paper article addresses school principal agency in a context of political reform, in particular, communities of learning. As agents in reform, Principals can be pressured to respond to government change agendas. Far from merely implementing policy, Principals can demonstrate agency in their interpretation and recontextualisation. Drawing data from Principal interviews pertaining to the Aotearoa/New Zealand Ministry of Education Community of Schools initiative, the authors consider leader agency in relation to discourses of economic rationalism, change and change leadership. The operationalisation of schooling reform and the necessity to think critically about policy within limited official consultation frameworks is highlighted.

Keywords: agency; Education policy; economic rationalism; leadership, Communities of Learning

Introduction

School leader agency is embedded in the shifting politics of school systems and is influenced by state level priorities (Riveros, Newton & Burgess, 2017), therefore it is a fallacy to interpret it as a leadership attribute that one can possess and deploy at will. In this article we consider how Principals perceive that policy interventions impact on their professional positioning, leadership and agency. We detail how the potential for Principals to act autonomously can be undermined by state processes of manufactured consent, and the enframement of practitioner discourse to reflect state discourses. Discourses serve to construct the world we see through particular politics and policies that manage, steer, 'know' and calculate populations" (O'Neill, 2015, p. 834).

Leader agency is both overt and nuanced when produced through the politics of policy

enactments. Principals are agentic when they resist, refuse, and appropriate policy related discourses. They are agentic when they make sense of the complex entanglements of policy, community and schooling discourses. Although we recognise that the notion agency has a long theoretical history and has been conceptualised in a range of ways, in this article it is considered from an ecological perspective where it is a temporal process of social engagement that is informed by the experiences of the past, oriented to the future as a capacity for further thought and action, and enacted in the present as the capacity to mobilise relevant discourses and resources (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2017, Charteris & Smardon, 2017). This implies that agency is emergent, involving the “individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors” that interplay in particular situations (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137).

In the Aotearoa/New Zealand context, schooling administration is undergoing significant change through reforms to the Education Act (Ministry of Education, 2017). School leader agency is discussed here in connection with these policy directions in Aotearoa /New Zealand. Leading up to this legislative reform, the Ministry of Education (MoE) proposed a school administration structure and funding model entitled Investing in Educational Success (IES) (MoE, 2014). In the policy parlance, the IES initiative was aimed to provide targeted tools and resources to build teaching capability and improve learning through the establishment of three initiatives: Community of Learning /Kāhui Ako (CoL) (MoE, 2016a), a ‘Teacher-led Innovation Fund’ (MoE, 2016b) and a ‘Principal Recruitment Allowance’ (MoE, 2016a). This article is primarily concerned with the CoL aspect of the IES policy. In particular, focus is placed on perceived changes to the role of the Principal as a school leader.

The IES initiative can be contextualised in the globalised, neoliberal milieu, where governments of nation states are increasingly focused on “economic competitiveness

and national viability” (Hardy, 2010, p. 72). In this climate, school administration, leadership and teacher professional development are regarded as important policy levers that are used to influence economic advantage. Broadly speaking, an analysis of discursive influences, which are discernible in our neoliberal milieu, can enable educators to consider how “contemporary... practices condition our current educational climate” (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 339).

The aim of the qualitative case study research was to investigate school leader perceptions of the implications of IES for New Zealand schools, students and practitioners. The research involved primary and secondary Principal interviews and was undertaken as the CoL policy was first introduced. We realised that there were recurrent references to the CoL policy in the data and determined to explore the Principals' positioning in relation to state legislated policy. The Principals articulated a range of perspectives, alluding to school collaborations, issues of incentivising to solicit policy compliance, the impetus for change and the recruitment of ‘change’ leaders. Points about policy discourses through the Community of Learning aspect of IES and changes to the role of Principal as the leader of an individual school are illustrated. The first section introduces the Case Study and frames the notion of leader agency, laying out the New Zealand policy background to the IES legislation. The second section outlines the data collected, the findings of the study, and their significance for schools in light of the major changes. Consideration is given to Principals' critical engagement with policy. Leader agency is enacted when Principals recontextualise policy to their contexts.

The Case Study

The article reports on a research project that was granted ethical approval through the authors' University institution. Principals from all primary and secondary schools across

New Zealand were contacted and invited to participate in an online survey into practices of professional learning. A total of thirty-eight school Principals were invited to undertake semi structured interviews. An interview question was posed to the Principals about the CoL changes in the Aotearoa/New Zealand school system. Data is drawn from the semi structured interview comments of nine Principals. The Principals were from 7 primary schools, one intermediate and one secondary school across New Zealand. The comments were selected on the basis that they are representative of the discourses inherent across the thirty-eight interviews conducted by the researchers, and provide commentary on Principals' policy interpretations and recontextualisation (Braun, Maguire & Ball, 2010).

The qualitative case study approach, described by Yin (2009) and used here, enables us to consider the politics of leadership in the face of policy changes to the Education Act (New Zealand Parliamentary Council Office, 2017) and the implementation of IES (MoE, 2015b) policy (in particular the CoL initiative) in schooling contexts. Discourses that are embedded in these far-reaching reforms to the New Zealand education system are identified to investigate to what extent leader agency is produced through this transitional process.

Leader agency in relation to changes to the Education Act (MoE, 2017) is of particular interest. We examined the transcribed interview texts, seeking "the ideological and material constructs that produce relations of power" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, 607). The interview data were inductively analysed by both of the researchers separately. The analysis focuses on two questions:

☐ *What discourses are evident when Principals describe the influence of policy initiatives?*

☐ *What are the possibilities for leader agency?*

Illustrative comments from Principals (pseudonyms provided) are included.

Agency and Politics

School leader agency is a relational process (Eacott, 2015) that cannot simply be mapped back to an attribute or disposition where a Principal is said to 'have' or 'not have' agency. While a Principal may have the 'wherewithal' to act agentically, there are discursive influences in schooling relationships. Therefore leader agency is dependent on the shifting discourses that influence schools and communities. With central administration becoming increasingly devolved, Principals are charged with administering self-managing schools within an increasingly privatised sector (Gunter, 2013). We discuss critical engagement, as a 'push back' by Principals against policy politics. Agency in leadership is not always transparent with Principals who often are wedged between staff, communities, and education administrative authorities, and expected to enact the complexity of policy. As a set of moral, political and social practices, leadership has a normative dimension (Blackmore & Sachs, 2012). Principals are often positioned as 'change agents.' In this position, Principals are expected to "'make things happen' as conduits for the implementation of government-driven reform, or more autonomously seeking to set the direction for [schooling] improvement and responding to independent change agendas" (Wallace, O'Reilly, Morris, & Deem, 2011, p. 66). Although agency has been well theorised (Archer, 2010; Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2017; Charteris & Smardon, 2017), little has been written about teacher agency (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2017; Charteris & Smardon, 2015) and even less about the agency of Principals (Riveros, Newton & Burgess, 2017; Wenner & Settlage, 2015). We conceptualise agency as the interplay of discursive, social and material influences that shape, and are in turn, shaped by school leaders. Discursive influences imply access to and knowledge of the affordances of specific discourses. Social and material influences include the relational and financial

affordances that support leader positionality and capacity for decision making. In the following, leader agency is considered in relation to The New Zealand Ministry of Education's policy on school clustering and analytical insights into technologies of governance are discussed. A brief account of the policy background to the reforms to the 1989 Education Act (MoE, 2017) and the links with the IES initiative (MoE, 2014) now follows.

New Zealand Policy Background and Reform to the Education Act

In 1987, a taskforce, led by Brian Picot, was charged by the New Zealand Labour Government to review Education Administration. 'The Picot Report' recommended a raft of changes that included increased synergy between primary and secondary institutions. The publication that emerged from The Picot Report, *Administering for Excellence*, (Department of Education, 1988), laid the groundwork for sweeping changes of the sort unprecedented in the OECD at the time. The schooling administration reforms under the associated Tomorrow's Schools policy agenda is described aptly by Fiske and Ladd (2001) as a "tight-loose-tight system of school governance" (p. 39). This can be seen as (tight) governing from a distance (loose) with accountability measures set in place (tight). Ten Education Boards responsible for primary schools across New Zealand were dissolved and each school became its own administrative unit with Boards of Trustees elected from local communities (Wylie, Cosslett & Burgeon, 2016). In the wake of Tomorrow's Schools administrative restructuring, schools have become "enterprising, industrious and governable within an enterprise culture" (O'Neill, 2015, p. 831) with learning institutions becoming 'free' to choose their own services.

Almost 30 years after the far reaching changes of Tomorrow's Schools policy, further reform is in the process of being implemented between 2017 and 2020 (MoE, 2017).

The impetus of these reforms to the 1989 Education Act (MoE, 2017) can be seen as a ‘tight-loose-tighter’ mode of governance with a social justice rationale provided for the tighter reforms. These steps increase the regulatory control of New Zealand’s centralised government in the interests of increasing school and community accountability for funding and student achievement. There were at least 22 changes to The 1989 Education Act when it was amended in 2017 (MoE, 2017). It included “Giving the Minister absolute discretion on decisions around schooling provision” (MoE, 2017, para 19). To achieve the New Zealand Government’s public policy objectives in the early childhood education and compulsory schooling sectors, these changes to the 1989 Education enabled two or more boards to appoint one person to be the principal of two or more schools that are administered by the boards. It also allowed a combined board to appoint one person to be the principal of two or more schools that are administered by the board (New Zealand Parliamentary Council Office, 2017).

The moves to appoint ‘executive Principals’ are aligned with the Investing in Educational Success policy initiative namely the ‘Community of Schools’, later renamed to ‘Community of Learning’ (MoE, 2016a). Framed as “the engine room” of IES (MoE, 2014), CoL, like the ‘Tomorrow’s Schools’ administrative reform agenda, is a process of devolving accountability. Education providers are incentivised to collaborate. “Communities of Learning are groups of kura/schools that come together, along with their communities, to raise achievement for all tamariki and young people by sharing expertise in teaching and learning (ako), and supporting each other” (MoE, 2016a, p. 3). This enables a distributed model of accountability to be implemented across schools and is made explicit in Ministry of Education documentation.

“The hallmark of your mutual commitment will be sharing responsibility and accountability for the outcomes of all the ākonga/students in your Community of Learning” (MoE, 2016a, p. 4).

Having provided an account of the initial shift to dissolve New Zealand education boards to establish self-managing schools in the 1980s and the current impetus to further legislate regulatory controls; we now use data to illustrate the discourses at play in the Principal interviews. Discourses that emerged in the data include ‘change’, ‘economic rationalism’, and ‘change leadership’.

Discourse of Change

Principals commented on the speed of the change, having space and time to consider implications, the appropriateness of specific terms and the uncertainty of policy direction. As outlined above, the uptake by schools of the COL policy has been incentivised through collective funding levers. Natalie describes how CoL have been coercively implemented and do not appear to offer the flexibility that she has found effective in a professional learning and development (PLD) model that she is familiar with. She described how the CoL was being implemented quickly with little consideration for what has been effective in the specific region of New Zealand in the past.

They are using bully-boy tactics and pretty much blackmailing us. If we don't join in any, we are not going to get anything... But it is so frustrating, we had this PLD model that worked, we had facilitators who put their heart and soul into it. We had Principals who supported and encouraged lead teachers to do what they needed to do and [offered] the flexibility that they needed to have... It doesn't feel like there is scope to be flexible... and [to] use aspects of the model we had that worked. It's been very rushed. (Natalie- from a rural full primary school)

Natalie highlights that the New Zealand Ministry of Education process of implementing CoL rests on incentivisation. The provision of financial support comes with mandates

and conditions that threaten to destabilise what are already perceived to be effective collaborations. Kate describes the importance of this support. She is interested in using the CoL initiative to retain the status quo of professional learning that is vital to the school's professional renewal, as well as the relationships that are already flourishing in their cluster.

PD is fundamental to our survival. It's going to be, if you don't join you're just going to get starved. So, we've thought we are strong enough. We have to believe in ourselves, in our relationships, that we can actually survive the structure and make it work for us because, you know, we're realistic. We have to. (Kate- from a rural full primary school)

Like Natalie and Kate, Bella talks of schools being more externally controlled.

I think they want schools to work collaboratively so there is a common purpose... to gain greater control of the schools to pull together. It could be that there's one governing body for all of the schools within the area... I don't know how on earth it would work. I haven't put a lot of time in to think it through. (Bella -from a rural full primary school).

Bella comments that she has not had the time to think deeply about the implications of the changes. The dissemination of information during this change process is an issue that concerns other Principals too. Bella uses a maze metaphor as she describes her feelings in facing what she sees as an unknown direction of development that she is charged with leading through the introduction of IES.

It seems like [the Ministry] are wanting to do something but we just don't quite know what it is that they're wanting to do. It kind of makes you feel like they know the way out of the maze but we are stuck in the middle of it. ...And we are meant to be leading and innovating and collaborating but nobody is to get a newer map to get out. (Bella)

Eliza describes how, in the early implementation stages of IES and the corresponding CoL initiative, there was a lack of clarity around the proposed direction of the initiative and that a range of diverse ideas were held amongst her colleagues.

The issue is that we've got this snippet of it but we haven't got the big picture of what the Ministry intends around the CoL. It's full of gossip and innuendo that

all of your PD is going to be tagged to the community of schools, that there is going to probably be shared Boards in some communities of schools and that the executive Principals are going to oversee those goals as opposed to Principals working collaboratively. We don't actually have a concrete understanding of what we're signing up for. (Eliza – from an urban intermediate school)

It is apparent that with little clarity on the direction of policy development at the time of these interviews, there were issues for Principal agency in regard to whether they could set conditions to proceed or not on their own terms. This perceived lack of information is problematic when Principals, as leaders of self-managing schools, are required to make fiscal decisions that have far reaching effects for schools, teachers, students and communities.

Discourse of Economic Rationalism

Economic rationalism is an influential discourse and is in the Principals' references to the issue of funding provisions, where they are offered incentives for their schools to collaborate. The alignment of collaborative structures and a business model is an issue for Trina, a secondary Principal. She highlights the effectiveness of pre-existing clusters and suggests that these informal arrangements are preferable as the money spent on establishing collaborations can be better deployed elsewhere.

I had some great concerns about it. I love the idea first of all, that schools collaborate, but I just don't think it's been resourced properly and in a way that's going to allow that to happen. It's sort of a communal collaborative process with the business model put on top of it. I am also currently in some clusters and collaborations that we started before this came in and they actually work really well. I think allowing schools to do that voluntarily, and without incentives is actually a better way of going. I would prefer the money put into schools in a different way. We are very under-resourced in terms of staffing, teacher aide time and special needs. I don't think this model is actually going to change achievement. (Trina – from an urban secondary school)

As Trina highlights, the IES (MoE, 2014) policy can be viewed as an economic strategy for reducing Education expenditure. By creating a CoL, the group can access funds for

professional learning. Suzanne suggests the possibility that schools may have one governing board and judges this proposed move to be primarily a fiscal concern.

I think [it is] just to save money actually. I think that you can then have one board of trustees as opposed to several. ...It really has become apparent that [the Ministry] is now looking for a network response rather than a localized school response... I think they're going to be able to have us all under an umbrella and I don't necessarily think that it will be in the best interest of everybody. I think that a school like mine could easily get lost and therefore the kind of interests or the direction we're working towards will get consumed by those other schools. (Suzanne- from an urban primary school)

These Principals recognise the incentivising process (policy levers) as a mechanism to solicit complicity. When funding is contested, schools that do not make an application or do not act quickly enough may miss out. Noah notes that schools that buy in to the initiative will have access to resources ahead of other schools. The potential pooling of funds is a positive way to collaboratively access PLD funding.

What [The Ministry] are really saying is that if you want to do it, we'll support you ahead of other schools, if you're not a community of schools, there might be less money available. [It] is about pooling your resources as a group of schools and buying professional development or [having] buying power for an innovation that you want to do in your school district. (Noah – from a rural full primary school)

The CoL initiative was marketed to Principals through the idea of career pathways to appeal to those who may seek movement from their roles. Ben describes IES in terms of incentivising the profession through a 'Teacher-led Innovation Fund' (MoE, 2016b) that offers teachers career progression possibilities.

[The Minister] says you can choose what community you go into. I am still to have a high school Principal explain to me why they were so keen on going for IES community of schools. I think it is outrageous... This has been sold to high school [teachers] as part of their career progression. If they run a successful community of schools, they get 50 grand and high school teachers all believe they're going to be these expert teachers and in

their career progression. It will appear in their CV 'lead teacher of such and such'. (Ben- from a provincial primary school)

Links between the fiscal concerns and the incentivised appointments of Principals and teachers, who make 'data driven' management decisions, are apparent to those leaders proficient in economic rationalist and change leadership discourses.

Discourse of Change Leadership

Immersed in the politics of improvement for school and system competitiveness in the global market, the discourses pertaining to school leadership are constantly shifting (Torrance & Humes, 2015). Change leadership discourse, in the context of this article, comprises a focus on decision-making for fostering community and improvement. It is therefore intertwined with the other discourses mentioned above and involves mitigating the "language of policy and practice to invoke public sector reform" (Torrance & Humes 2015, 795). In the shifting milieu, it is not surprising that Principals evoke a change leadership discourse to talk about policy enactment and their role in their community contexts. Leader agency is evident in the Principals' readings of the Education Legislation Bill (MoE, 2016c), as they identified the governmental discourses inherent in it and took up positions to push back when they spoke with us in the interviews. Magnus agentially reads the MoE discourse as a form of problematic control. He suggests that the targeting of underperforming schools, and by extension practitioners, through the CoL structure is an unwarranted measure being imposed on all schools.

They are forcing it on us. They have titles like 'Lead Principal' and 'Change Principal'. I think that the Ministry is trying to get more control. By enclosing us in a community, it might be easier to manage the random [schools] that are out there. (Magnus- from an urban primary school)

Like Magnus, Dana likens the IES approach to a system she has seen operating in New South Wales' schools, as well as occurring in other countries. While she expresses concern regarding the layering of authority, and acknowledges that some schools may require additional support, she is concerned that all self-managing schools are being included in the 'control' measures when they are not required.

I believe that the model is more like [what] I saw in the Sydney Schools where you have much less autonomy in the school and you have a central Principal model... We work extremely collaboratively together and we like that model and we believe in collaboration... [The Minister] is trying to reinforce a collaborative model that actually is not clear with us. It's about control. She talks about 'career pathways' and creating these 'super Principals' who will have oversight of a number of schools. That's adding another layer of management, that's really unnecessary. , When schools are functioning they shouldn't have to have somebody else put in control. There are controls through the Education Review Office. We don't need more.
(Dana- from a rural primary school)

Bella expressed concern about the selection criteria for the Lead Principal. She problematises appointments that are based on experience over efficiency and effectiveness.

There are a number of issues around the structure of one key Principal who oversees all the classroom [teaching] Principals... You have to have a number of years of experience in order to be able to lead the Principals. In a community where you've got a lot of inexperienced Principals -I don't know how that would work? So, by default, if you're a bit older, does that mean that you get to do it? It seems very old fashion thinking. (Bella)

The Lead Principal is perceived as an accountability role. Kate acknowledges the power of improvement through collaborative action however suggests that the 'change' Principal role provides an additional layer of administration to the existing Education system. This layer would serve to intensify control and lines of accountability. She uses a metaphor of physical violence to describe the role of the Lead Principal demanding results from the CoL.

Our cluster could show you that we have better achievement when we work together... They want somebody to be accountable, to say 'here's your target, you're going to improve.' You're going to have to be the bad person who goes around the classroom and beats everybody over the head with a book when they don't get it. I think that they need a direct line of authority... (Kate)

Kate also expresses concern that the appointment of a Lead Principal may destroy what has been a democratic collaboration to date.

I think it has the capacity to kill our cluster. That is because in our cluster nobody's voice is louder than anybody else's. It's not on school size; it's not on how long you've been in there. Everybody's voice is the same and that's the key to it working. Nobody has it done to them and everybody has a responsibility to the initiative. What we've identified is that there are several roles. There are people who are innovators. They are visionaries. People are doing all different roles. That way we're all bringing strength to that initiative... so when you look at that executive Principal, you're saying "Well, you're getting 25 grand, you do it. (Kate)

Kate, critiques the policy initiative, wondering whether professional jealousy could impact the generative potential for collaboration. Leader agency is now discussed in relation to the discourses of change, economic rationalism, and change leadership.

Leader Agency and Economic Rationalism

Aotearoa New Zealand Education policy is becoming more tightly instructive –arguably at the expense of educator professionalism and community autonomy. This was evident in the MoE (2015a) consultation discussion paper statement that policy “tells children and young people, parents, whānau, teachers, Principals, early learning services, schools, kura and government agencies what they are supposed to do” (p. 4). Policies can serve as both guiding frameworks and straitjackets. We could see the temporality of agency (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2017) in the Principal comments where they evaluated the CoL initiative through the lens of previous experience, projected forward to consider what could happen, and mobilised relevant discourses to articulate concerns

in the present. Leader agency is a “repeatedly contested” process, which is subject to different ‘interpretations’ yet, at the same time, located and framed by the “possibilities of discourse” (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012, p. 3). Discourses are never ‘pure’ as they interlace with each other in “relationships of alignment” (Gee, 2001, p. 720). This complexity of interdiscursivity implies that policy is always an enactment rather than a simple process of implementation (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012).

There is the clear entwining of social justice and economic rationalist discourses in New Zealand MoE policy (MoE, 2017). Unraveling these discourses can be perilous for practitioners, as resistance to one, may appear as a reckless disregard for the other. For example, Principals who resist the logic of economic rationalism can be positioned as if they are not concerned with social disadvantage and student underachievement.

School collaborations are well established in Aotearoa/New Zealand schooling settings. Some collaborations have been spontaneous and many have emerged through funding initiatives. Collaboration has been co-opted for political purposes by the MoE, as demonstrated by the CoL direction (MoE, 2016a). The findings of this research suggest that there was concern that the CoL initiative could adversely influence existing cross-school collaborations, with established, high performing groups destabilised. Further, the study suggests that the process of incentivising particular types of schools clustering could serve to produce greater homogeneity, rather than contextual and political school community individuality. Although there can be challenges garnering consensus among Principals who have their own styles of leadership and visions for effective practice, clustered schools may be easier to harness than individual self-managing units. This centralised control potentially impinges on leader agency with the extra layer of hierarchical leadership in place.

Over the last two decades, change has been a powerful discourse driving ‘future focused’ schooling improvement. Like the seminal Tomorrow’s Schools reform (Department of Education, 1988), CoL construct a particular vision for the future. O’Neill and Snook (2015) point out that there is an interesting assumption that the future is embedded in the present and it is awaiting discovery. “Thus people are criticised for ‘opposing’ or ‘living in the past’ if they disagree with what those in power call ‘the future’—an inevitable and benign state lying in wait” (p. 196). As Principal, Kate, explicitly mentions, professional peer pressure has been applied to Principals so that they work together to make change happen in alignment with policy directions.

“The momentum for change toward a goal is huge. So, there is a lot of pressure, peer pressure or professional pressure, to keep... working to mould change together and make it work. (Kate)

The policy direction (for example IES) is clearly embedded in economic rationalist discourse. Ball (2004) describes how economic rationality in Education produces a series of paradoxes that are incorporated into social and educational policy. They are, as demonstrated in the findings, an attempt to recreate forms of social relations within the logic of economic rationality. However, these very social relations are necessarily destroyed by this logic. An example of this paradox can be seen in the contrivance of community.

Both competition and collaboration here are ‘produced’ and ‘done’ through incentives and deliberate action. The ‘doing’ of community or of collaboration can also be seen, in many instances, as involving the recognition of the ‘value’ to be added, or extracted from such doing. (Ball, 2004, p. 14)

Although Ball researches in an English context, the prevailing ethos of economic rationalism applies to the incentivised creation of communities and individual career paths in New Zealand education. Ball writes (2004), “while schools are encouraged to act as knowledge businesses they are also urged into collaboration and sharing” (p. 14).

Therefore, communities can be seen as sophisticated forms of control. As suggested by the Principal Magnus, the targeting of underperforming schools through the CoL project, results in an unwarranted measure being imposed on all schools.

Community, in this instance, can be seen as an instrumentalist contrivance, framed within the logic of the market. According to Hargreaves and Ainscow (2015) “in recent years, in too many countries, school districts have been driven to distraction and to near destruction by top-down changes that have undermined or bypassed their authority and also the communities they serve” (43). The notion of a Lead Principal raises a question around whether this hierarchical process will become a top down initiative as some of the Principals suggest. The view that there may be benefits in developing new career pathways for some, is out-weighed by the impact such positions potentially impose on smaller, currently more autonomous Principals and Boards of Trustees. It is apparent, in many of the comments above, that the Principals are proficient with economic rationalist discourse. They are suspicious of attempts to put political mechanisms in place (such as contrived communities and accountability to a Lead Principal) as part of the ‘tight-loose-tightening’ control across the diverse and individual schooling contexts. The policy shift is driven through the compelling rationale of social justice outcomes. Change discourse leverages a sense of the inevitability of social progress and the potential for Principals to be left behind. The Principals’ evocation of change discourse highlighted how the political process associated with MoE policy reform was managed through a careful and controlled release of information. The process of consultation was unclear for Principals who could only gauge part of the agenda and were not consulted about some of the more significant and far reaching changes in the reform. The “gossip and innuendo”, the maze-like information dissemination and the general lack of clarity suggest insufficient time and space for Principals to come to grips with the

implementation, political intent and ramifications of the change. This was problematic for leader agency as the 2016 consultation took place during one of the busiest periods for schools, the end of the year. The challenge to be agentic under these circumstances was encapsulated at the time by Eliza, a busy Intermediate Principal.

This is just the most crazy time of year for Principals. With the reporting and assessment. I'm transitioning 300 kids out and 300 kids in. Setting up staffing for next year. And that's when the Minister's chosen to consult on probably the most significant change to New Zealand education since 1989. (Eliza)

This limited consultation period was exacerbated by the number of New Zealand teacher Principals who work in small schools and have diverse responsibilities at this time of year. Dana's concern that there is a layer of authority and control imposed on schools that are functioning well, raises a question about the motives for these measures. As she points out, the initiative could just target the schools deemed at risk rather than reframing the governance of all schools. It appears that the social justice rationale may well be a Trojan horse for tightening control over the semi-independent administration structures of New Zealand schools.

Conclusion

The interviews are snapshot comments, captured from the Principals in the period before The Education Legislation Bill (New Zealand Parliamentary Council Office, 2017) was submitted to the New Zealand parliament. These comments addressed how Principals recontextualise policy in their specific school and community milieu, yet it is beyond the scope of the research to discuss consequential actions. Although they provide an account of how Principals constructed, reconstructed and presented prevailing education discourse through comment and critique during the CoL consultation period, the Principal comments do not illustrate enacted forms of agency. There is scope for further research into enacted agency now that the legislation has passed (New Zealand Parliamentary Council Office, 2017). Nevertheless, the data

presented does provide an opportunity to consider leader agency in relation to pressures to reconceptualise schooling administration. We pose the following questions for further investigation:

- EQ1 *On a longer term basis, what is the impact of the ‘Lead Principals’ structure and how will this framework influence the dynamics of schooling communities?*
- EQ2 *What are the implications of policy revision for leader agency as enacted in schools?*
- EQ3 *To what extent, and in what ways, do changes to administrative systems of this sort lead to improved social justice outcomes for students?*

On a global scale, policy reform targets economic rationalism. A primary means is through harnessing social justice discourse to increase the efficiency of human capital for fiscal interests. The discourse of change leadership is marketed as both a way to address social inequity in diverse school communities, and as an enticing pathway for experienced Principals to progress in their careers. Refusing or resisting a discourse, particularly one that is embedded within a mandated policy that is framed by a social justice imperative, can be difficult. Reforms to the New Zealand Education Act and associated policies like IES, mark a significant swing from the local, contextualised curricula of the Tomorrow’s Schools ethos toward a “tight-loose-tight[er] system of school governance” (Fiske & Ladd, 2001, p. 540). There is value in recognising the politics and processes of policy enactment and leader agency in action. Even if there is little official consultation over moves to implement policy on a national scale, agency can occur when Principals articulate critical engagement and push back from the interstices in professional communities.

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