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Policies and Addressing Issues of Educational Disadvantage**

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Gender and Australian School Leadership:

National Partnerships Policies and Educational Disadvantage

This paper examines contemporary Australian school leadership drawing on interviews with twelve principals in low socio-economic schools in a capital city as well as interview data collected from three district administrators, the line managers of the principals in these schools. The paper draws on Gewirtz and Ball's (2000) distinction between two ideal types of leading in schools, that is, 'welfarism' and 'managerialism' and their gendered dimensions. It takes up feminist concerns about the regendering of educational leadership that is occurring as a result of educational marketization. Specifically, the paper examines the articulation of masculinist managerial discourses in the talk of a district administrator and the rearticulation of these discourses of leadership in the talk of one of the male principals working in a low socio-economic school community. We demonstrate the ways in which neoliberal discourses of educational performativity are appropriated by both the district administrator and the school principal in and through their management talk.

Introduction

At the turn of the last century Gewirtz and Ball (2000) wrote a prescient paper in which they noted a shift in discourse around school leadership from that of 'welfarism' to 'new managerialism'. While acknowledging that, in fact, multiple discourses of leadership exist and indeed typically overlap, they use these as broad typologies to examine a case study of changing school heads at an inner London comprehensive capturing a time when Tony Blair's 'New Labour' was only beginning to mark the educational policy landscape. The authors introduce us to 'Ms English' and 'Mr Jones'. The former defines her leadership in terms of a public-sector ethos, an emphasis on social justice and a commitment to consultation and cooperation. Meanwhile Mr Jones readily embraces the emergent emphasis

on business values and practices in education citing the importance of competition, technical rationality, instrumentalism and competition as defining his leadership. Gewirtz and Ball (2000: 265) conclude by identifying ‘the beginnings of a discursive shift’ away from ‘welfarism’ to ‘managerialism’. It is, as they note in passing, reflective of a movement away from a ‘more feminine’ style of headship to a mode that is ‘somewhat masculinist’.

In the period since Gerwartz and Ball’s (2000) study, feminist scholars have taken up the subject of changing discourses of school leadership and, accordingly, moved gender from the margins to the centre of the analysis (e.g. Blackmore and Sachs 2007; Court 2007; Marshall and Young 2013). Like the broader gender and leadership scholarship of which it is a part, these studies have highlighted the confluence between archetypes of leadership and privileged socio-cultural constructions of masculinity, and revealed the negative implications this has for women in decision-making roles. In this paper we engage with this literature and the theoretical orientation of feminist poststructuralism which focuses on the interplay between language, meaning, power and identity and understands gender as relational, performative and discursively constituted (Ford 2006). We do so through an analysis of interviews with school principals in low socio-economic schools situated in an Australian capital city, as well as interviews with three district administrators, the line managers of the principals.

The Policy Context

One of the key policy platforms of the Rudd Labor government elected nationally in Australia in November 2007 was articulated in the policy document *The Australian Economy Needs an Education Revolution* (Rudd and Smith 2007) which encompassed the Smarter Schools National Partnerships Program (Australian Government, 2011a). The latter included

the project *Smarter Schools National Partnership for Low Socio-economic Status School Communities* (henceforth, *National Partnership*) which was directed at addressing socio-economic inequality in education. Such a goal was to be realised via the scheme's 'six priority reform areas': the introduction of incentives to attract high-performance principals and teachers, adoption of performance management for principals, strengthening of school accountability, initiation of greater flexibility in school operational arrangements, provision of innovative and tailored learning opportunities, and extension of schools' external partnerships (Australian Government, 2011b).

In accordance with these reform agendas, all schools in the study had new principals on five-year contracts whose increased pay and ongoing appointment were tied to a series of performance criteria. These criteria included factors such as staff and student retention, student enrolment, number of suspensions and student academic performance. Through the latter the National Partnership scheme reinforced another key dimension of the broader 'education revolution' of the Labor Government, that is, the 2008 introduction of national assessment. This is manifest in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (aged 8, 10, 12 and 14). While individual students are provided with results, levels of achievement by school are also aggregated and posted on the government website *MySchool* and extensively discussed in the media.

There is now an extensive body of academic literature critical of the negative effects of high stakes NAPLAN testing on teacher professionalism and student learning (see Comber 2011). In addition, there is now extensive research on the limitations and negative consequences of the way in which data are captured and reported on the *MySchool* website (e.g. Lingard 2012; Lingard and Sellar 2013). A few studies (e.g. Angus 2012; Keddie 2013) have begun to

explore the complex ways in which teachers navigate the new performative policy terrain, but not yet from the perspective of leadership, including, most importantly, a gendered perspective.

Method

This paper draws on data from interviews with twelve principals employed in schools in an Australian capital city and the three district administrators responsible for overseeing these schools. The schools led by our interviewees and the broader district in which they are located are incredibly disadvantaged on a wide range of social and economic indices. The majority of schools had a typical enrolment of 450 to 600 students, and all schools had high enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students often exceeding 10% of the entire school population. These schools included also a considerable number of students who spoke a language other than English at home, and consequently required specialist English language instruction at school. For example, two schools had over 30% of students for whom English was a Second Language. Approximately, a quarter of the student population in these schools belonged to single parent families.

The interviews were conducted in 2012 as part of an ARC Linkage funded project and were guided by an interview protocol which covered a range of themes including leadership in the context of National Partnerships. Interviews were approximately one hour in length, during which many participants gave the researchers a guided tour of the school facilities. A semi-structured interview approach meant that questions could be contextualised and participants could expand on issues or raise unanticipated themes (Fontana and Frey 2006). Interviews were transcribed for analysis which focused on recursive coding and cross-coding with

attention to patterns, convergences, differences and marginal themes (Alvesson and Deetz 2000).

We commenced this process viewing the data through Gewirtz and Ball's (2000) 'ideal types' of gendered management as 'welfarism' and 'managerialism' attending to slippages, collisions and contradictions. However, given the space limitations of this paper we concentrate on the most dominant of the discourses taken up unequivocally by the lead district administrator and one of the four male principals interviewed for the study.

Education as Business – Productivity, Connectivity, Accountability

The fact that the nascent market discourse Gewirtz and Ball (2000) identified in the language and practices of Mr Jones has solidified and proliferated across the educational sector in recent years was clearly evident in our interviews. Perhaps most vocal in this regard was the lead district administrator, who, like his counterparts in other regions oversees state education across a very large area which includes nearly two hundred state funded primary and secondary schools. He was a long term employee of the state education department, with a teaching career extending back to the 1970s along with experiences in school leadership positions dating back to the 1980s. Further, he was a dominant presence in the lives of the interviewees renowned, as one commented, for '*watching our data like a hawk*'.

The lead district administrator was overtly dismissive of 'welfarism' as manifest in feminised emotions such as 'pity' and instead advocated a rationalist and objective approach to foster the transformative and emancipatory effects of education. In his reckoning the incredible complexity of teachers' work, particularly in schools with high level needs, is rendered straightforward provided there is a Taylorist attendance to a predetermined and uniform set of

tasks. At the same time, as his constant reference to the term '*brutal facts*' and engagement of sporting and military metaphors revealed, it is also a combative and tough endeavour requiring traditionally masculinised traits such as strength and force.

We're in the process of education. We're not in the process of pity. The greatest way these kids can get out of the hump is by actually getting them to learn...The greatest way out... In my district one of the things that you will probably pick up in my district, they will have used different language than they use in other districts. I'd hope some of the principals use words like productivity. There is that model there (points to wall). But there's our interpretation of that good to great model there. Business breakthrough. Confront the brutal facts. (Points to wall again). It is my tool. You've come in with a challenge and you've immediately gone: What do you need? Pedagogical framework. Boom. Bloom. Wrong. You need to come up here – watch all of this – so if you look at systems you go: Vision. Business. And systems. ...Productivity. Feedback and Connectivity. Notice we've not used the word pedagogy.

Educational disadvantage is constructed, as in the federal policy discourses, through the market rhetoric of learning and productivity. There is still an agenda of social justice here, but social justice is defined in narrow terms of learning outcomes as measured on NAPLAN tests, and pedagogy as measured by productivity criteria.

Unsurprisingly, given the federal policy context of National Partnerships, the perspectives of the lead administrator were echoed to varying degrees in the interviews conducted with each of the school principals. In what follows, we draw on interview data from one male principals (Principals 3). Throughout the interview, Principal 3 talked about *developing leadership habits* that would *prepare him for a bigger school*. He also suggested that some other *less*

gutsy principals might view his leadership *habits* as a bit *harsh*. Principal 3's interview talk often mirrored that of his district supervisor. He referred us to his own one page 'vision of leadership' which he saw as critical to the school's success. He explained:

We've got some very tight level achievement monitoring systems across the whole school..I believe in a very clear and coherent visible framework. You know what I mean? So we have a one page document. That's that guy here. (Points to wall). And that dictates how we do business in this school... everyone in this school knows if they're not on that page then they risk lacking – well no, they don't risk lacking relevancy. They lack relevance. ...So that's my leadership model and that's how I do business. ...When they lack relevance they're in trouble (Principal 3, Extract One).

As Principal 3 continued on this theme he reflected that the six-weekly meetings with teachers about student achievement data were understood by some as '*where you take the big stick and kick the teachers*'. He corrected this perception further explaining the way in which performance monitoring of teachers had taken on the form of the '*confessional*' whereby subjects become self-regulating negating the need for external force in the form of the '*big stick*' (Foucault 1984, Jones, 1990). For example, when discussing performance review meetings with teachers, Principal 3 talked about the ways in which these meetings have evolved in his school. He stated:

A lot of people when we talk to them about this they think is that where you take out the big stick and kick the teachers. All of the HODs have said well the meetings might have started that way a little bit but they've actually evolved ... So the HODs have become such good supervisors and such good practitioners within their faculties if someone needs kicking they

get kicked at the point of necessity. These meetings now are all about okay so you've got a Year 8 SOSE class and 25 per cent of the kids are failing or 25 per cent of the girls are failing. What do we need to do for you to improve that data? And the teachers have just loved it so it's really quite extraordinary. Because a lot of the time they struggle with the concept of accountability but because of the way the HODs have done it - and it really is their work - it hasn't been an issue (Principal 3, Extract Two).

The principal cited above presents a complex interpretation of a neoliberal education policy agenda, albeit spattered with masculinist, managerialist language of *the big stick, kick the teachers, harsh, gutsy habits* of leadership. The crucial point we want to make here, is that the market driven performativity policies of National Partnerships are elaborated by this principal in a particular version of 'accountability' to the staff and students in the school. Prior to the interview audio-recording this principal spoke of the tireless work undertaken by teachers, sometimes to the detriment of caring for their own families, and of his own politically left leanings to addressing issues of educational inequality.

Conclusion

Management discourses are multiple and fluid as has been evidenced by the emergence of 'new' feminine modes of management along with post-heroic leadership styles which attend to emotions, relationships and networks (Fletcher 2004). In this paper we have shown how masculinist, managerialist discourses were dominant in the interview talk of one district administrator and a number of principals under his administration. This atomistic, individualist market driven, performative style of leadership pitted teacher against teacher, school against school in a competitive, combative style which was in stark contrast to that adopted by many of the female principalsⁱ, and also some of the other male principals.

At the same time it would be too simplistic to suggest that what we encountered in interviews was a form of performative managerialism or its inverse a mode of feminist welfarism, because, as we emphasised earlier, there were also overlaps and inconsistencies in the narratives. Our next analytical focus will be on these moments of discursive tension.

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ⁱ NVivo analysis revealed that the female principal data frequently made reference to notions of: a group or collaborative problem, sharing concerns and working on problems together, taking group responsibility rather than blaming individual teachers, developing a nurturing culture across the school that supported the work of teachers.