Professionalism and competing responsibilities: moderating competitive performativity in school autonomy reform

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Abstract

Discourses promoting the benefits of school autonomy have floated freely internationally since moves in the 1980s to greater devolution in the UK, New Zealand, the USA, Australia and Sweden. The most recent Australian version, Independent Public Schools (IPS), grants school leaders more latitude over aspects of their work. But this autonomy is constrained by technologies of competitive performativity, now the norm across Australian and other school systems. Entrepreneurial policies focused on competition, compliance and improved performance make schools, their leaders and teachers, more responsible to external accountabilities. At the same time, autonomy is creatively exercised by leaders due to public service orientations associated with traditional teacher professionalism. This analysis of two Australian case studies of IPS, a secondary school in Queensland and a primary school in Western Australia, illustrates how school leaders navigate conflicting demands of the audit and performance culture by exercising autonomy according to differing notions of professional responsibility, disrupting and moderating the more inequitable priorities and effects prevalent in many performative systems.

Introduction

Education systems of many countries are being radically transformed by neoliberal global policies as alternatives to "the state-centred, public welfare tradition of education provision" (Ball, 2003, pp. 215-216). Interconnected policies and practices of school autonomy, privatisation, school choice and accountability now constitute the common-sense of educational reform (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Musset, 2012). State schooling is being re-organised around the business principles of competition, flexibility, innovation, outputs and leadership "based on an idealisation of the firm as a generic model of social and economic behaviour" (Ball, 2007, p. 37). Schools increasingly operate within a framework of external

accountability, managerialism and competitive markets, producing a "culture of competitive performativity" (Ball, 2003, p. 219). These systems of performativity and the 'terrors' they induce are refashioning dominant notions of teaching professionalism, seeking to produce a self-determining, enterprising and managerial teacher subjectivity (Blackmore, 2004). Reforms promoting entrepreneurial self-management are criticised for eroding teacher (not principal) professional autonomy and the profession's long-standing responsibility for and commitment to equality and the public good (Biesta, 2017; Connell, 2013; Sachs 2001; Smyth, 2011).

While neoliberal modalities of government powerfully shape the education field, the coherence, power and effects of neoliberal policies must not be overstated (Rowlands and Rawolle 2013). Government programs and policies are never simply implemented but are translated, mediated and enacted within specific socio-material contexts in which interacting discourses, practices and actors compete. This results in complicating, strategic and pragmatic engagements in situ as studies illustrate, for example, of English self governing schools (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012; Keddie, 2016; Gewirtz, 2002; Gunter, 2012), Swedish free schools (Lundahl, 2016) and US Charter schools (Musset, 2012). The take-up of any policy in schools is not straight-forward. School leaders with increased autonomy find themselves differently positioned and their responses to competitive and performative demands and expectations range from acquiescence and strategic compliance to outright resistance (Keddie, 2016; Moore, George & Halpin, 2002; Thomson, 2009, 2010; Thompson & Mockler, 2016; Wilkins, 2011). Studies of moves towards self management in the state of Victoria (Australia) in the 1990s and their long term consequences exemplify how principals struggle to both perform (being good as defined by external accountabilities) and reform (doing good for the students in their care) (Blackmore, 1999; Smyth, 2011).

This paper explores the variegated ways school leaders enact autonomy in relation to traditional notions of professional responsibility and the responsibilising apparatus of competitive performativity in the context of Australia's next policy move towards greater autonomy, Independent Public Schools (IPS). IPS was initiated in Western Australia (WA) in 2009 (Liberal Party of WA, 2008), and later adopted in Queensland (Queensland, n.d) and is now promoted by the federal government as part of the *StudentsFirst* initiative (see Australian Government, 2015) with the injection of 70 million dollars towards building each state's current developments to support schools to become more autonomous. On the one

hand, IPS autonomises the provision of state school education by giving greater authority to school leaders to run their schools as semi-autonomous organizations particularly in the areas of staffing and budgets. On the other hand, the autonomy of school leaders is steered by a responsiblising framework that includes bureaucratic regulation, the discourses and practices of competitive enterprise, and external public accountability measures like Australia's National Assessment Program of Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) available to the public on the MySchool website and the media ranking of schools in the UK (Doolan and Blackmore 2017). Emerging literature analysing the IPS program and its effects on principals and schools (Gobby, 2013, 2016) indicates the need for nuanced accounts of how IPS school leaders understand and negotiate autonomy in relation to their professional identity; hence the focus of this analysis.

Background

As the dominant social imaginary in Western education, neoliberalism in it's Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1999) has powerfully shaped the field of education. Neoliberal political and governmental objectives are making "the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society" (Foucault, 2008, p. 148). Endorsed by global governance bodies like the OECD and World Bank (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), school autonomy reforms are being pursued by policymakers with the twin goals of dismantling bureaucratic authorities and fostering schools as semi-autonomous enterprises, without significant positive evidence as to impact (Musset, 2012). The momentum of change has shifted away from a bureau-professional regime of governance in education towards a "bureau-enterprise culture" (Woods, 2011, p. 32) premised upon choice where, within the context of bureaucratic influence, entrepreneurialism, "with its celebration of energy, dedication and continual change, answers a perceived need to make improving effectiveness and efficiency a constant organizational drive" (Woods, 2011, p. 33).

School leaders (i.e. principals, deputy principals) are championed as reformers and mediators of policy (Gunter, 2012). The conception of freedom in school autonomy programs like IPS encourages an entrepreneurial leadership of competition and self-responsibilisation (Gewirtz, 2002; Gobby, 2013; Niesche, 2011; Smyth, 2011; Thomson, 2009, 2010). Principal autonomy is therefore an important site for the critical analysis of how neo-liberalism is

enacted in schools. Foucault argued that power works through freedom, and freedom is a fabrication of power. Rose explains: "Freedom is the name we give today to a kind of power one brings to bear upon oneself, and a mode of bringing power to bear upon others" (Rose, 1999, p. 96). Post-welfare states direct their political and governmental power towards the ends of enabling individual and organizational agency and freedoms, in return for being disciplined by knowledges, techniques and technologies of responsibilisation, such as professional standards, best practice management and visionary leadership. This responsibilisation instils normatively prescribed forms of conduct, self-responsibility and ownership of individual choice (Shamir, 2008). Hence, principals' empowerment and freedom to manage more with less (Wright, 2012) creates a powerful double movement of autonomy and responsibility that binds the subject to specific truths, rationalities, norms and ideals (Foucault, 2002).

In the case of principal autonomy, the extraction of principal responsibility is achieved through embedding performativity, understood as "a technology, a culture and mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of incentive control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)" (Ball, 2003 p. 216). Competitive performativity is enacted through the discourses and practices of corporate management and leadership, market competition, and the panoptic practices of audit, accountability and the media (Ball, 2003; Doolan and Blackmore 2017; Gewirtz, 2002). Ball (2003) observes that the performative culture ties the professional and personal identity of principals and teachers, as well as their personal capital and professional fate, to the seemingly objective and rational measures of productivity or output (i.e. 'success') of their schools and students. This 'new professionalism' distorts modern professionalism and professional responsibility (Biesta, 2017, p. 319). Teachers "find their values challenged or displaced by the terrors of performativity" (Ball, 2003, p. 216) and its forms of judgment and responsibility. Rendering traditional professionalism and its "ways of thinking and relating dated or redundant or even obstructive" (Ball, 2003, p. 218), teachers submit their professional conduct and responsibility to the knowledge and rules of performativity (Ball, 2003; Connell, 2009; Tseng, 2015). They are enjoined to make themselves responsible through market/customer-responsiveness, technical-managerial regimes of accountability, and 'evidence-based practice' (Biesta, 2017). With this refashioning of the conception, enactment and policing of professional identity and responsibility, teachers (and school leaders) must serve the narrow performance imperatives of the school (i.e. targets, outputs,

data), and less so the learner, the community and the profession (Sachs, 2001; Trnka & Trundle, 2014; Woods & Simkins 2014).

This shift from bureau-professional governance towards an emerging "bureau-enterprise culture" (Woods, 2011, p. 32) does not signal a wholesale transformation of school practices, teacher professionalism, nor the rules of reason and responsibility guiding professional practice. Foucault (1978) remarked, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (p. 95). The social field is traversed by an assemblage of discourses and discursive practices, and individuals are free to act and think in this non-determined field of possibilities. Consequently, the performative should be understood alongside established institutional and professional practices and rationalities inscribed with other discourses of education and teacher professionalism which articulate alternative notions of the purpose of education and teacher professionalism through which principal autonomy and responsibility can be thought and exercised (see Sachs, 2001; Keddie, 2017). As Trnka & Trundle (2014) observe, "neoliberalism cannot encompass the breadth of subjectivities and collective relations that constitute contemporary enactments of responsibility" (p. 141). The multiplicity of conceptions of the profession remain active in the collective repertoire of practices of professionals and institutions, and the "competing modes of responsibility" (Trnka & Trundle, 2014, p. 136) of these discourses produce affordances, tensions, paradoxes and counter-conducts in principals' responses to being held responsible (Gable & Lingard, 2015; Niesche, 2012; Keddie 2016; Thompson & Mockler 2016; Wilkins, 2011). What this looks like in practice is of interest to this paper.

Evidence of the variegated enactment of the autonomy/performativity tension is growing, giving rise to nuanced descriptions of principals' work, their rules of conduct and their changing sense of professional responsibility (Ball et al. 2012; Blackmore, 1999; Coldron, et al. 2014; Niesche & Keddie, 2016; Thomson, 2009; Woods, 2013). For Wilkins (2011), performative priorities and practices have not led to wholesale re-professionalisation. He found little evidence that teachers "are markedly instrumentalist, rejecting a traditional professional identity in favour of the 'entrepreneurial competitive' identity envisioned in the performative era" (2011, p. 403). Moreover, although entrepreneurial leadership constitutes the dominant discourse of school leadership, the flexibility encouraged by the entrepreneurial self opens a space for other non-performative priorities to emerge (Woods, 2013).

Educational leaders navigate changing policy demands in ways that reflect a continuum of compliance, moderating the performative and competitive excesses and effects of current reforms. (Doolan and Blackmore 2017). Marketisation, managerialism and competitive performativity have significantly reformed education systems and the teaching profession, including school leadership. However, the dominant rationalities, techniques and practices of neoliberal government necessarily interact with traditional notions of professionalism and its conception of democratic, social and equity goals. In considering these ambiguous relationships, we refuse to construe teachers and school leaders as victims of competitive performativity. While neoliberalism '"does us" – speaks and acts through our language, purposes, decisions and social relations' (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 88), we also do neoliberalism as we negotiate the discursive assemblage of professionalism, performativity, school autonomy and neoliberalism.

The research context and processes

Independent Public Schools

In Australia, where this research is located, initial movements in Victoria and South Australia towards decentralization during the 1980s aimed for social democratic community- based participation of parents and teachers in local decisionmaking. In Victoria, the neoliberal Schools of the Future (SoF) progam after 1993 based on managerialist and marketist rationales mandated self-management in state schools, converting democratic discourses of participation into parental choice (Blackmore, 1999). SoF positioned all Victorian state schools as small businesses, initiated program budgeting with funding based on enrolments. Principals gained some autonomy and discretionary budget, while restricted by staff attrition. One effect was increased reliance on school communities to raise funds to supplement the budget, favouring well-off communities. Greater autonomy over staffing means in 2017 increased casualisation of the teacher workforce, with most graduate teachers on short term contracts (Rowan et al., 2014). This employment insecurity, together with media naming and shaming of schools and increased external accountability with NAPLAN and MySchool has impacted on teachers' collective sense of professionalism (Doolan and Blackmore, 2017).

While most Australian states other than NSW moved towards greater decentralisation, the most recent push towards autonomy are Independent Public Schools. In 2010, the Liberal

Conservative Western Australian government implemented its Independent Public Schools program, and IPS core elements were adopted by the LNP in Queensland in 2013. Whereas self management was mandated in Victoria, schools in WA and Qld must apply for IPS. In both states, IPS is promoted, as with self management, by a language of empowerment, community ownership, responsiveness and innovative leadership with markets and parent choice an ever-present subtext (Education & Health Standing Committee, 2016; Liberal Party of WA, 2008; Queensland, 2014). IPS involves school principals taking direct responsibility for budgeting, recruiting and employing staff, building maintenance and school performance overseen by School Boards in WA and School Councils in Queensland. Schools must create business plans and schools enter into Delivery and Performance Agreements with the Department, similar to Victoria. The differences lie in implementation. In Queensland, the fifth (250) of all state schools that are IPS, are considered 'high potential schools' expected to catalyse wider change through innovate practices and leadership. In WA, with 57% of all state schools now IPS (524) comprising 80% of teachers and students, all schools are encouraged to become IPS. Whereas student enrolments in WA state schools are restricted to catchment areas, Queensland students can enrol in any state school unless at capacity. Schools are provided with additional resources to support their conversion to IPS, although this rarely covers the cost of transition.

Research approach

Two principals and a deputy principal were interviewed from two schools. Crimson State High School, located in regional Queensland, is a large school of over 2000 culturally diverse students. Crimson has a Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) score of 947 below the average of 1000. The principal 'Jack' and deputy principal 'Monica' have led the school for thirty and twenty years respectively. The case study of Crimson explored the school's pedagogical, curricular and whole school processes focusing on equity and social justice. At Forrest Primary School, with 450 culturally diverse students and located in a metropolitan area of Perth, Western Australia, 'Paul' has been a principal for 3 out of his 5 years of principalship. Forrest has an ICSEA score of 950. Each leader was interviewed face-to-face for an hour in 'purposeful conversations' (Burgess, 1988) that sought to generate deep and context-specific descriptions (Patton, 2002) about matters of leadership and school autonomy in relation to their school's conversion to IPS status.

The data were analysed to generate insight into convergent and divergent themes and to enable us to theorise how these leaders variously speak their professional selves into existence through the myriad of possibilities and discourses that traverse the educational domain. The focus was on how each navigated matters of school management, audit and testing in ways that aligned with but also disrupted and moderated the narrow priorities of the performative culture. The purpose of this analysis is not to make sweeping generalisations about how school leaders experience school autonomy reforms, but rather to document context-specific enactments (Ball et al., 2012) of school autonomy, professionalism and competitive performativity.

Managing the competitive enterprise

While school autonomy reforms boast of principals' freedom to manage, that freedom is shaped by regimes of management and performativity, the available resources (staff, buildings, funding), their location, and their reputation and image relative to other schools. Paul's work day is filled with management tasks such as balancing the budget, managing staff, building maintenance such as organising the replacement of ceilings in the school's classrooms, consulting with the School Board and Parents and Citizen Association, and working with the school's on-site out of school care facility, which is a private-public partnership. In the context of diminishing support from regional and central offices, these practices are becoming common-place in the lives of school leaders, who must "become smarter" (Paul) in the way they work. While acknowledging increased pressure, Paul does not object to these practices, which reflects general support from principals for the devolved management of schools (Thomson, 2009). However, the demands of management and performativity shaping principals' responsibilities are challenging traditional educational leadership work focused on teaching and learning (Blackmore, 2004; Smyth, 2011). He comments:

> … in the old days the principal … basically led the school and drove curriculum improvement in the school, curriculum management, curriculum implementation, and that now is a much smaller part of my job… I'm looking at the way that I'm working, my priorities and how am I going to get more involved with that particular element of my job [teaching and learning], and what are the things that I can actually deflect to

others that may be less important, not necessarily part of the core business of teach[ing] and learning, which is still my number one priority. But that's been pushed aside by these things. That is challenging a lot of principals. People that say to you quite openly, "I did not sign up for this."

Increased administrative and performative expectations constrain Paul in leading his school's curriculum and pedagogy, but he does not abandon responsibility for it. He gives priority to this 'core business' by allocating administrative work to his deputies. Like many principals, Paul is unwilling to acquiesce to emerging norms of the profession, although he is quietly 'playing the game' (Gunter, 2011). While Paul is sympathetic to these principals, his Queensland counterpart, Jack from Crimson State High strikes a different tone. As a 'reforming head' (Gunter, 2011), Jack believes principals should be more responsive to the changing policies and priorities placed on schools. He derides the irresponsibility of "dependency principal-ship… [the] mentality where everything just arrives from someone outside" which he views as "out of date". For Jack, principals should be independent and pro-active: this is the manner of entrepreneurial principalship authorised by the IPS program, at least rhetorically.

Competition is a feature of Australia's education system, and one enhanced by the IPS program. IPS status changes enrolment patterns to favour IP schools (Education & Health Standing Committee, 2016), contributing to systemic inequality by segregating students and producing residual schools, the "known losers" (Connell, 2013, p. 105; Lamb, 2007). This seemed to bear out with the growing popularity of Crimson High. Principals of the surrounding state schools with fewer and declining enrolments considered Crimson a threat because they were "taking the very best students" (Monica). While concerned about the negative impacts of this residualisation on the quality and reputation of the public education system more broadly, Jack and Monica expressed little sympathy for the plight of their neighbouring schools. They viewed any criticism of their success from these schools as blame-shifting and an abrogation of their leadership responsibility for improving learning outcomes. They believed falling enrolments should incentivise public schools to reflect and improve:

> …but I guess what needs to happen then is that's where that whole notion of 'Let's look at what we're doing, let's reflect on ourselves, let's not reflect on the successful

and start blaming them for what we're not doing ourselves' and I think as a system, to some extent, we've allowed that notion of blaming someone else when we're not doing well, to run rampant really. That's got to stop. (Monica)

Here, Ball & Olmedo's (2013) assertion that neoliberalism 'does us' and 'we do' neoliberalism rings true. Jack and Monica believe competition can work to the ends of strengthening the public system by encouraging evaluation of teachers' and schools' practices and decreasing complacency and mediocrity. Crimson did not have to confront the effects of shrinking enrolments. Instead, strong student demand resulted in the Department capping its intake. Monica realised the possibilities for Crimson to promote an elite status. However, she was concerned that this could further residualise nearby state schools. She shifted responsibility when commenting that "the system needs to be very careful" about elitism as marginalising some schools and diminishing the social benefits of public schooling.

Despite the potential of IPS to fragment the public system in education (Lamb 2007), competition was not ruthlessly pursued without consideration of equity and public goals, dilemmas Victorian principals negotiated in the 1990s (Blackmore, 1999). Paul was reticent about pursuing competitive advantage at the expense of neighbouring schools., although in WA enrolments across catchment boundaries is strictly controlled. Paul resists the commercial model associated with market competition, more possible for primary schools especially in mid to lower SES areas where competition is not as fierce as in secondary schools where competition can be about survival. Paul reasons that competition detracts from focusing on student needs and treating the parents as consumers distorts the professional-client relationship. This "would flip from the need to support my students and staff and so on to satisfying the parents," (Biesta , 2017), which may reflect the narrow interests of pro-active individual parents. He views his professional responsibility as serving his students and the community more broadly, reflected in his unwavering commitment to "connect with my community" and "be very aware of the context that I'm working in."

Audits and testing

The relentless pursuit of improvement in learning as measured by universal standardised testing is now used as a marker of principal performance. In Australia, all schools are subject to yearly National Assessment Program of Literacy ad Numeracy (NAPLAN) standardised

test of literacy and numeracy, NAPLAN results are published on the MySchool website and often become the basis of schools target-setting, annual Department performance reviews and audits of discipline, teaching and learning. Rather than dismissing this mode of accountability, Jack argued that external testing and auditing of schools brings responsibility and confidence to the system: "I'm afraid state schooling has brought [this loss in confidence] on itself by our performance - we need to perform better." He continues:

> 80% of the kids I got into grade 8 last year were not reading at age-appropriate level on the test. On top of that, every year for the last decade between 12 and 18% of those kids … have been reading at grade 1, 2 and 3 level [which] means they can't read simple words like mat, m.a.t. So, if people think 'Oh well teachers should just be left alone to do whatever they want', there is that philosophy and in the end we have to take responsibility for kids' outcomes … schools and school rooms in [the past were] black boxes of mystery … and if kids didn't perform, most teachers in that era would say 'Oh, that's because they're dumb' and teachers took no responsibility for student learning or outcomes. Well that whole culture … is changing.

In these comments, Jack blames teaching quality and a lack of teacher responsibility for academic performance. Taking ownership over the performance of schools, for Jack, requires being positively disposed to using externally imposed audits and tests to drive teacher accountability and being responsible as a principal. Jack links his sense of professional responsibility to the rules of performativity. Indeed, Jack and Monica actively sought audits and accreditation from outside bodies, including the Council of International Schools (which has accredited 600 schools worldwide) as another form of distinction. Queensland IP schools are encouraged to seek "credentialing bod[ies] from the outside to come in and have a look at your processes and help you review and evaluate and look for ways to improve" (Monica). This CIS audit involved twelve visiting educators from throughout the world assessing Crimson's organization, pedagogy and curriculum. Jack and Monica do not construe this as simply "a compliance process" (Jack) or an attempt at optimising organizational processes, but a way to prioritise and improve the school's student centredness and learning environment. Putting "a positive, non-blaming, non-punitive twist on the audits" (Monica), Jack explains the audit was approached as "an opportunity to develop":

…the people who came to our school looked at the total school and they identified various gaps. One of the things they said was we didn't have a lot of student voice in the school – a lot of opportunity for students to have an input into the school, and so that was something we addressed and we got in place measures to give students a lot more voice and ways which we seek their opinions on issues… we have a 'Student Voice' program in the school where all classes have representatives and we get their views on various aspects of the running of the school. As well as that we linked up with a Canadian system called 'Tell Them From Me' where you actually come up with a questionnaire and every kid in the school does that questionnaire online. So we actually get feedback from every child in the school on various issues and we feed that into our strategic planning process every year.

Jack's school is currently being audited and accredited by the Australasian Schools Accreditation Authority to check "that we are up to standard and we are achieving our aim to be a world class school." While the process seeks to evaluate and improve their school's performance, it enacts the corporatised discourse of schooling. Audits and accreditation are practices of responsible self-government by the entrepreneurial principal, with accreditation establishing the school's distinctive identity by conferring a 'world class' status, thus contributing to building the school's reputation and quality market "brand" (Monica).

With regard to NAPLAN testing, Paul cautions that a reductive focus on data potentially narrows curriculum and pedagogy around testing and narrow academic performance. Although all the interviewees seek to avoid this, Paul recognises some schools do because of competition and fear of Departmental review if 'under-performing'. He comments:

So other principals are data driven, they're extremely data driven, and they love data and they love testing, and they do lots and lots and lots of testing, and lots and lots and lots of data, and lots and lots and lots of telling teachers what they need to be doing… the feedback I've heard from teachers from schools…is they're not nice places to work… pressure city.

Paul recognises how NAPLAN testing supports hierarchical and directive forms of leadership where principals exercise their autonomy to reduce teacher professional autonomy in order to improve data and thus retain school autonomy. Such an approach is not inevitable. Paul is

committed to using NAPLAN data to inform planning and practice, but without it dominating teachers' work and detrimentally affecting Forrest's professional culture. Paul observes that in a performative work and learning environment privileging NAPLAN corrodes teacher satisfaction and collegiality and narrows learning: "You come to school and it's DI, DI, DI, test, test, test, you know, you're not going to hit all the targets..." Believing that "we've got lots of hard-working, dedicated staff who are passionate about their work and who want to see the best outcomes for their kids," Paul avoids individualising blame, but shares responsibility for students' academic, social and emotional outcomes by orchestrating conversations with his staff around areas for improvement. He explains:

> A lot of principals have the same mindset that I do… that NAPLAN's useful but I'm not going to live and die by my results… I pay attention to NAPLAN in as much as it gives me a snapshot of how the children are performing broadly, and we use that data to identify whole school areas of need and we also interrogate the data a bit more to find out specifically what are the elements that we need to be looking at in different year levels because there are gaps…if my staff see that Paul is driven by the data and he's reacting to data all the time, and I'm putting downward pressure on them, you know, 'Lift your game, lift your game. We've got to do better, we've got to do better', it's not going to do a lot for morale. I'm not singling people out but I'm saying, 'What are the things this is telling us?'

By questioning the data, Paul addresses the wider issues impacting on learning for his teachers and school board and acts "as a data buffer to protect core teaching activities; building students' social, emotional and cultural capacity to participate in learning" (Gable & Lingard, 2015, p. 10). He moderates the effects of NAPLAN by affirming the need to "reinsert the large or 'big' perspective that reasserts the primacy of context" and recognises the need to maintain teachers' sense of professionalism and agency (Smyth et al.'s, 2014, p. 173). Contextualising data means discussing how Forrest's culturally and linguistically diverse student population and its high transiency rate affect the results. Paul therefore does not impart greater truth power to this data, but moves beyond the commonsense of the rhetoric of evidence based practice thereby rejecting dominant managerial discourses. Reflecting a "strategic pragmatism" against neoliberal orthodoxies by "preserving locally valued visions, philosophies and practices" (Moore et al. 2002, p. 186), in the face of pressure for test-focused and didactic approaches to teaching (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013), Paul

emphasises his responsibility to his students and the community. He speaks of promoting student creativity, attending to cultural diversity and building strong relationships with the community, listening to students, and engaging students in meaningful learning beyond testing, such as through the school's kitchen and gardening program. He explains:

> I am not going to turn this into a John Fleming school [with a focus on Direct Instruction]… I want to see my kids out in the garden planting things and cooking things and doing art, and you know, making a mess in the science room and enjoying that. But also, I want to see teachers doing innovative things in their classrooms. I've got a teacher that runs a drama club after school; I was running cooking lessons myself after school, had a group of kids in the kitchen cooking with me... Did they do any test? No, we made a lot of mess and it was hectic, but they had fun, they loved it.

Monica and Jack also question the test driven ethos pervading the system. Monica commented that "We're not just about NAPLAN data … all that data is very important - but that's a symptom of something bigger, you know... so what is the purpose of improving that?" They imagined the wider democratic project of education when they spoke of school self-governance as being, in large part, responsive to the needs and interests of the students and local community, and not what was prescribed by the audit culture (Keddie, 2016). Jack said IP schools have a responsibility to "make strategic decisions about the purpose of the school and the nature and running of the school, in order to meet our clients [i.e. students] who are our chief people we need to be accountable to." They recognised how the school's legacies fed into the academic performance of students, such as the history of economic and social hardship and racism that had long affected its large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. This required implementing supportive processes and programs, such as "liaison' and "well-being structures" that supported school participation and academic goals.

Conclusion

School autonomy in the context of managerial and performative policies is re/forming school and teacher subjectivities. Autonomy, however, is not freedom from being governed or power. The autonomy discourse fabricates new regimes that seek to exploit personal 'freedom' of choice to pursue innovation, efficiency and improved performance (Gobby, 2013, 2016). Regimes of competitive performativity inform school leader subjectivities,

inciting freedom whilst responsiblising them to notions of autonomy constrained by performative and entrepreneurial forms of professionalism (Tseng, 2015). Principals are enjoined to become CEOs who prioritise the bottom line. Hence, success "or indeed survival, for autonomous schools in the current environment requires them to negotiate their 'freedom' whilst subject to increasing pressures to accept and conform to market ideologies and to increasingly high-stakes external accountabilities" (Keddie, 2015, p. 2).

The policy technologies of market, management and performativity narrow forms of self-relation and conduct (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). However Foucault (1994) reminds us that power relations are "mobile, reversible, and unstable" because they assume "a degree of freedom" to act, think and become otherwise (p. 292). The leaders in this paper reinforce the power of systems of accountability and performativity when they are compliant, but leaders also exploit when possible their autonomy to benefit their schools and students by moderating their effects. The leaders at Crimson High embraced the performative aspects of IPS autonomy, both fabricating a 'brand identity' and providing an opportunity for self-reflection, student engagement and systematic improvement, neither fully compliant, nor outright resistant. At Forrest Primary School, greater autonomy meant less emphasis on performance and Paul was more openly disruptive, acting 'smart' while working with/against the discourses of managerialism and performativity in order to protect his staff and focus on leading the core work of curriculum and pedagogy (Gable & Lingard, 2015). All three leaders resisted making themselves fully responsible with regard to their *school* by uncritically adhering to the norms of performativity and entrepreneurial-competitive professionalism. It is unclear "whether they are prepared to play to their own positional detriment" (Thomson, 2010, p. 17) for the sake of public service goals of a more equitable public *system* of schooling.

One difference emerging from this study is that school autonomy is differently experienced in the primary than the secondary sector (Coldron et al., 2014). IPS is practically and logistically more difficult to carry out in primary schools than in larger and better resourced secondary schools. But primary principals are less impacted by high stakes testing in the final years of schooling due to heightened competition to access higher education. Nevertheless, there are resonances in how autonomy and notions of responsibility are strategically exercised in both systems. Leaders utilise often conflicting discourses and practices to achieve the best outcomes for their school and fashion their sense of responsibility from the

range of available discourses sedimented in institutional, political and school practices and professional histories. While recognising the utility of external accountability and auditing in identifying and remedying underperformance, such accountabilities were benchmarked against the needs of the school and broader community. At Crimson, an audit was used as an 'opportunity' to focus on student voice. Forrest reinforced their commitment to promoting student creativity and engagement through its garden and cooking program. In a sense, the "flexibility encouraged by [the] entrepreneurial self created a space for something other than the dominant performative priorities" (Woods, 2013, p. 237). These leaders moderated the excessive focus on data and their schools' competitive positioning in order to affirm the importance of context and social justice in terms of their professional responsibility to their students and communities with learner-centred and community-oriented programs and strategies. "Neoliberal 'responsible' subjects exist within a matrix of dependencies, reciprocities, and obligations" and autonomy gives rise to the pursuit of responsibilities that can work with and against each other, "sometimes reinforcing neoliberal responsibilisation, and at other times existing alongside or undercutting it" (Trnka & Trundle, 2015, p. 150; Thomson 2010).

The enactment of competing responsibilities relies on the capacity to draw on the assemblage of professional discourses and practices through which school leaders exercise their autonomy. A multiplicity of responsibilities remain embedded and active in the repertoire of self-steering practices of professionals and institutions - responsibility to students, to community, to the profession, to the state bureaucracy, to the federal government and to the public. At Forrest, aspects of activist professionalism (Sachs, 2001) are evident in Paul's efforts to cultivate trust within and beyond the school, his practice of openly and collaboratively discussing different approaches and values, and critically reflecting on the "'state of play' so as to generate options where they can act rather than be acted on" (Fenech et al., 2010, p. 91-92). This 'telos of practice' in the pursuit of educative and public service goals is central to democratically-oriented professionalism (Biesta, 2017), and evidence of "the potential for a resistant or 'transformative' professional'" (Wilkins, 2011, p. 393).

We do not claim that principals can reduce the systemic impact of neoliberal reforms pushing forms of autonomy which dismantle public schooling. School leaders have been able to exercise agency and professional responsibility for equity and social justice within centralised bureaucratic systems without dismantling systemic responsibility for equity. The issue is

whether over time, principals "can variously retain, sustain, rediscover, and renew older values – such as public service, community participation and equity" (Woods, 2013, p. 238) and whether a 'new professionalism' defined in terms of meeting performance goals, standards and accountabilities fully supplants a 'democratic professionalism' that foregrounds responsibility to their profession, the wider community and public service goals.

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