10

Principals' perceptions of school autonomy and educational leadership

Richard Niesche, Scott Eacott,
Amanda Keddie, Brad Gobby,
Katrina MacDonald, Jane Wilkinson
and Jill Blackmore

Research Brief

What is the problem?

- While there has been broad support for school autonomy reforms, school principals have been experiencing increased workloads, stress, anxiety, poor health and poorer well-being outcomes for a number of years

- In Australia, these reforms have not necessarily led to improved student achievement, better outcomes for social justice nor particularly improved workloads or decision-making across the board for school principals

What we did about it

A 3-Year ARC-funded Discovery Project: School autonomy reform and social justice in Australian public education

- This paper comes from the first round of data collection 42 interviews with various stakeholders across each of the four states: education ministers, heads of parent organisations, heads of principal organisations, principals, academics, leaders of teacher unions and leaders of other professional organisations.

- The sample in this paper (n=8) are drawn from school principals, recently retired principals, and ex-principals (now representatives of principal associations around Australia).

What we found

1. Differing perceptions of school autonomy

2. Negative effects on workload, health and wellbeing

3. Changing nature of the principalship with pressures of compliance and accountability

4. Shifting nature of leadership

Why it matters

- Principals continue to experience high levels of workload, worsening health and well-being

- Principals are inequitably able to respond to and implement school autonomy policies

- A narrow version of leadership emerging that is a hierarchical, individualised form of decision-making by the principal

- Heroic leadership and exceptional individualism mistakenly become markers of good practice and leadership in autonomised schools and systems.

About the Researchers

Richard Niesche

Richard Niesche is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. His research interests include educational leadership, the principalship and social justice. His particular research focus is to use critical perspectives in educational leadership to examine the work of school principals in disadvantaged schools and how they can work towards achieving more socially just outcomes. He has published his research in a number of books and peer reviewed journals, and he is also the founding co-editor of the 'Educational Leadership Theory' book series with Springer.

Scott Eacott

Scott Eacott PhD, is a Professor in the School of Education | Research Fellow in the Gonski Institute for Education at UNSW Sydney and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan. He leads an interdisciplinary research program that seeks to develop tools for educators, schools and systems to better understand the provision of schooling through relational theory. His distinctive relational approach that has led to invitations to run workshops and give talks in Norway, Canada, the USA, Indonesia, South Africa, Mexico, and throughout Australia. Scott has authored > 100 publications, led major research projects (funding > $3.7M) and successfully translated his research into policy and practice. You can connect with him on Twitter @ScottEacott

Amanda Keddie

Amanda Keddie is a Professor of Education at Deakin University. She leads the program: Children, Young People and their Communities within the REDI (Research for Educational Impact) Centre. Her research interests and publications are in the broad field of social justice and schooling. She began her career as a primary school teacher in 1998 while studying for her PhD in Education at Deakin University.

Brad Gobby

Brad Gobby is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at Curtin University. He is a policy sociologist whose research examines education policies and programmes, with a focus on the areas of school autonomy and governance. His recent work also investigates policy and pedagogical responses to the climate crisis.

Katrina MacDonald

Dr Katrina MacDonald is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in the Centre for Research for Educational Impact School of Education (REDI) at Deakin University.

After a career in anthropology and archaeology, Katrina trained as a primary and secondary teacher in Victoria. Katrina's key research interests include educational leadership, social justice, public education, the history of Australian educational research and the sociology of education through a practice lens (feminist, Bourdieu, practice architectures). She is particularly interested in how school autonomy reform has influenced social justice outcomes, and the implications this has for school principals.

Jane Wilkinson

Jane Wilkinson is Professor in Educational Leadership, Faculty of Education at Monash University, Associate Dean Graduate Research and an adjunct in the School of Education at Charles Sturt University. Jane is Lead Editor of the Journal of Educational Administration and History and a member of the Australian Council of Educational Leadership, Victorian executive.

Jane's research interests are in the areas of educational leadership for social justice, with a particular focus on issues of gender and ethnicity; and theorising educational leadership as practice/praxis. She is a lead developer of the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer, & Bristol, 2014). She also draws on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work and the philosopher, Ted Schatzki. Jane has published widely in the areas of women and leadership, refugee students and theorising leadership as practice/praxis.

Jill Blackmore

Jill Blackmore is Alfred Deakin Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, former Director of the Centre for Research in Educational Futures and Innovation and Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences Australia. Her research interests include, from a feminist perspective, globalisation, education policy and governance in universities, TAFE, schools and community; international and intercultural education; educational restructuring, leadership and organisational change; spatial redesign and innovative pedagogies; teachers' and academics' work and equity policy.