

Power, Control and Resistance in the Labour Process of School Leaders:

The Case of the NSW Public Education System

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Discipline: Work and Organisational Studies

A thesis submitted to fulfil requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy

The University of Sydney
BUSINESS SCHOOL

2025

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I declare that this thesis is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at University of Sydney or at any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis.

Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at the University of Sydney or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged in the thesis.

I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.

Isabella Eve Dabaja

January 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The findings of this thesis are built upon the working realities of thirty-five school leaders, educators and directors in the NSW public education system, each of whom selflessly shared their time, experiences and insights despite immensely busy schedules. I am thankful to them all, not only for their contributions as the subject of this research, but for the magnitude of their service to public education. I only wish that I could acknowledge them by name.

I was fortunate to have been supported by a Research Training Program Stipend Scholarship for the duration of my doctoral program — a privilege without which I would not have been able to complete this research. I thank the Australian Government for this vital public funding. I also thank the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand (AIRAANZ) for supporting me to attend regional conferences and further develop my thesis through access to a vibrant network of employment relations researchers. At the institutional level, I acknowledge the University of Sydney Business School for their support. I am grateful to Ben Breeds, tireless advocate for our research student cohort and often the human being behind the institution.

There is no research community in the world like the Discipline of Work and Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney. I am so appreciative of the opportunities provided to me by the discipline to learn and grow, and my mentors and colleagues who sincerely model what it means to be values-led in your research. In particular, I thank Dr Frances Flanagan and Professor Chris F. Wright, who have been close and profound sources of support. I also thank Professor Marian Baird, Professor Rae Cooper, Associate Professor

Stephen Clibborn, Dr Alex Veen, Dr Jo Orsatti, Dr Hannah Kunst and Dr Nate Zettna, as well as Dr Jeaney Yip for your many years of cross-disciplinary guidance.

To my 'PhD Pals', Jed and Meike, and the many other bright and brilliant faces in my chosen research family: Talara, Laura, Rick, Veronica, Stefanie, Sheena, Joey, Fahad, Tycho, Lewis, Shivani and Leila: thank you for years of spirited discussion and companionship. Thank you to Matthew, the 'maths person' behind this thesis. Thank you to Hamish for your expertly crafted puns — as many as there are pages ahead.

Julian, thank you for every single day of your extraordinary support. I could not have done this without you.

I give the greatest and most wholehearted thanks to my supervisory team, the remarkable Professor Bradon Ellem, Professor Susan McGrath-Champ and Associate Professor Martijn Boersma. I will never be able to adequately express my appreciation for your wisdom, encouragement and patience at every twist and turn of this challenging journey. I could fill another thesis with all that I have learnt from you. My gratitude is infinite.

Finally, I thank my family: Haala, Anthony and Luke Spiranovic, my grandparents Salem and Elwaz Bazzi, my sister Gwendalyn, my mother Zena, and most of all, my late father, Tarek Dabaja, to whom I dedicate this thesis. Your love, immeasurable sacrifice, and commitment to us is what made all of this possible. Every word belongs to you. You inspire all that I have ever done, and all that I will ever do.

ABSTRACT

'Power, Control and Resistance in the Labour Process of School Leaders: The Case of the New South Wales Education System' is an employment relations thesis that combines an understanding of neoliberal public policy with labour process theory to examine the work of public school leaders. Since 2011, the New South Wales public education system has undergone extensive state-driven change, with 'new public management' reform aiming to introduce claimed private-sector efficiencies through the devolution of managerial responsibilities to the local level of the school. Initial reforms failed to improve educational outcomes, and led to system-wide intensification of workloads for staff in schools. As a corrective response, the 'School Success Model' was implemented in 2020: a second suite of reforms that claimed to reintroduce centralised support while emphasising shared, rather than local, responsibility.

This research investigates the impact of the School Success Model on school leaders' work, recognising their position at the nexus of this public policy and its workplace enactment. It adopts a qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews with principals, deputy principals, and key stakeholders in public education, to first understand the key challenges in their work during this policy period. It then conducts a labour process analysis of work under new public management to investigate the outcomes of the reform, and identify control mechanisms in the work of school leaders. Further, articulating the constant tensions present in their work, it presents evidence of resistance to these control mechanisms. Its findings contribute to our theoretical understanding of the labour process of school leaders as 'pseudo-managers' in the public sector for whom work is increasingly controlled, despite policy rhetoric around either the expansion of local autonomy or increases in centralised system support.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CESE Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

DOE The NSW Department of Education

ESL English as a second language

GERM Global Education Reform Movement

HSC Higher School Certificate

LPT Labour Process Theory

LSLD Local Schools, Local Decisions

NAPLAN National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy

NPM New Public Management

NSW New South Wales

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

RAM Resource Allocation Model

SLSO School Learning Support Officer

SSO Student Support Officer

SA South Australia

The Department The NSW Department of Education (colloquially)

The Federation The NSW Teachers Federation (colloquially)

UK United Kingdom

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Enshrined by the United Nations as a basic human right in 1948, education is universally recognised as a necessary precursor for meaningful participation in society, vital for the self-determination of all human beings (Tomasevski, 2005). In Australia, it is compulsory to attend school between the ages of six and seventeen. Thus, whether inadvertently or otherwise, school is a key facilitator in the socialisation and overall development of young Australians. This inherent value of education has led to its historical provision as a socialised public service through centralised policies and resource allocation. In addition, schools are sites of work. Principals and their teaching staff support the delivery of this service: serving in a pedagogical capacity as educators, but also as employees and leaders within an organisation. Given the importance of education to society, the nature of this work must be considered of equal importance. It is to the restructuring of this work and its impact on school leaders in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW), home to the largest remaining education bureaucracy in the Southern Hemisphere (NSW DOE, 2017), that this research turns its focus. This thesis investigates the impact of a new era of policy reform on school leaders' work within the NSW public education system.

Public education worldwide has been subject to what Sahlberg (2016) has termed a 'Global Education Reform Movement', or GERM, referring to the restructuring of education through new public management strategies. New public management (NPM) is an approach to the organisation of state departments and agencies that aims to increase the efficiency of public services through the implementation of private sector business practices (Ward, 2012). This is a product of, and closely reflects, the political and economic zeitgeist of neoliberalism: an ideology that advocates for free market conditions in all areas of the economy that is reinforced by the regulation of a strong state (Harvey, 2007). Historically, responsibility for most of the decisions around staffing and hiring, administration, budgeting, financial management and resource allocation in public schools were centralised in Australia (Fitzgerald, 2011), and,

formerly, in the systems of similar nations such as Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Rizvi in Martin et al., 1994). Primarily, this ensured that resources and standards were equitable between all schools within the system, upholding the conditions required for universal access to the same quality of education for all students (Fitzgerald, 2011). This also ensured that teachers could focus the majority of their time on education, and that executive staff such as head teachers, deputy principals, and principals could focus on fostering educational leadership (Smyth, 1995). These systems have slowly been regionalised and dismantled to facilitate business-like models of self-management within individual schools (Dow et al., 2000).

This restructuring of public education has involved the implementation of policy technologies pertaining to both the delivery of education itself and the organisational management of schools. The chief impacts of GERM on education systems lie in a focus on competition through the marketisation of schools; the standardisation of assessment and teaching; a narrowed focus on core skills, including reading, mathematics and science; the importation of corporate change models into public work; and test-based accountability (Sahlberg, 2016, p.10-11). With respect to the organisation of work in public schools, NPM or GERM style reforms have most prominently been implemented through administrative devolution. Specifically, this has meant redistributing responsibility for particular functions in an organisation that were formally managed by a central authority; in particular, this responsibility is delegated to 'lower levels' or 'local sites' (Bresser-Pereira, 2004).

In Australia, individual states and territories each administer their own public education systems, but the last two decades have seen these systems overlaid by the development of a national curriculum and corresponding GERM style reform technologies (Thompson and Cook, 2017). These include a national standardised assessment program, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), which has brought fundamental change. It has introduced: the standardised assessment of literacy and numeracy targets at four stages throughout schooling; a national online database, 'My School', that publishes the standardised performance data

of every school in the country; an independent statutory authority to oversee the delivery of the national curriculum, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority; and a privately owned company, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership that regulates the standards for registered teachers and school leaders (Thompson and Cook, 2017).

Following these national curriculum reforms has emerged the possibility that the social purpose, values and aims of education are also being reshaped. In 2008, the Ministers of Education from every Australian state and territory developed the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians: a federal commitment to the purpose and role of public education that acts as the basis for the national curriculum. The Melbourne Declaration acknowledges that schools are an essential component of the development of young Australians, citing not only the role schools play in their intellectual development, but in their “physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing” (MCEETYA, 2008, p.04). However, it has been argued that the goals and commitments established in the Melbourne Declaration are overwhelmingly oriented towards upholding economic interests, arguably reflecting an agenda that threatens to supersede issues of social priority such as equity and inclusion (Ditchburn, 2012).

At the state level, style reforms have varied in nature — for example, in Western Australia and Queensland direct centralised management has been replaced by contractual agreements between the government and individual schools since 2009 (Fitzgerald and Rainnie, 2012). In Victoria, business-like practices such as responsibility for resource management, finances and budgeting have been delegated to individual schools since the 1990s (Blackmore et al. 1996). Despite their local differences, the implementation of these changes to public education work share one common outcome. Each has brought concerns around increasing workloads, as the time available to focus on the task of teaching has decreased amidst growing administrative demands (Gavin et al., 2021; Heffernan et al., 2022; Longmuir and McKay, 2024). Reforms of this nature have been criticised for their focus on introducing marketisation and competition in the

name of restructuring and cost cutting in the delivery of a vital public service — the foundational aims of which have historically been to provide universal access and equity (Fitzgerald 2011). Critics have also pointed to the entrenching of social and spatial inequalities (Fitzgerald and Rainnie, 2012).

1.2 Reshaping public education work: from Local Schools, Local Decisions to the School Success Model

Despite the many concerns with new public management in schools, and in the face of vehement opposition from the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF), the trade union that represents all public-school principals and teachers in the state, the NSW Department of Education (DOE, also referred to throughout this thesis as the 'Department') began the implementation of a suite of devolutionary changes to work in 2012 (NSW DOE, 2017). Named Local Schools, Local Decisions (LSLD), the reform promised a greater capacity for schools to respond to the specific needs of their communities. Aligning with new public management, the policy aimed to achieve private sector like efficiency through the reduction of bureaucratic processes, providing local schools with greater control over historically centralised decisions in five key areas: 'Managing Resources', 'Staff in our Schools', 'Working Locally', 'Reducing Red Tape', and 'Making Decisions' (NSW DOE, 2017, p.1).

At the end of this reform period, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5, many of the most negative outcomes reported resembled those documented by decades of research into new public management, including a reduction in the scope and quality of the service, further bureaucratisation, narrower terms of performance management and severe increases in workload and stress (Diefenbach, 2009). The most prominent of these was an almost universal experience of intensified administrative responsibilities (Dabaja 2019, Fitzgerald et al. 2018, McGrath-Champ et al. 2018). Processes of decentralisation in public sector work, such as the devolution of decision making to schools under LSLD, have also often been accompanied by tightened central control

over strategy and policy (Hoggett, 1996, Protherough and Pick, 2002). Despite the principals' new responsibilities and the emphasis that the LSLD policy placed on control and flexibility at the school level, principals reported that they felt *more* restricted, particularly in the areas in which they felt they could affect the most positive change in their schools. Examples include the capacity to provide more job security to staff employed on a contract basis, exercising more control over the curriculum, and the tools to engage in long term financial planning (Dabaja, 2019). While principals were given greater control over their budgets, this obscured the fact that in many cases, these budgets were still not sufficient to properly resource their schools (CESE, 2020; Dabaja, 2019). Despite claiming to deliver reduced administrative demands and greater control at the local level, as in other new public management reforms, research argued that workloads and administrative burden increased, and central control was tightened (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018, Dabaja, 2019). Scholarship suggests that these outcomes were emblematic of new public management, claiming to achieve particular outcomes and then working to achieve the opposite (Diefenbach, 2009; Protherough and Pick, 2002). As the policies around work in NSW public education continue to change, these arguments, and more recent developments in their work, demand attention.

Following internal assessments that declared the failure of the LSLD reform to produce "improved results" in schools (NSW DOE, 2021, p.1), in 2021, the Department implemented a 'whole-system, evidence-led reform program' named the School Success Model (NSW DOE, 2021, p.1). Outlining a vision for the improvement of educational outcomes across the state, the School Success Model set a range of 'Department targets' to establish goals for achievement across the whole education system. It described these goals as "ambitious, yet reasonable" (NSW DOE, 2021, p.1). These targets were developed in six key areas: NAPLAN, Aboriginal Education, the Higher School Certificate (HSC), Attendance, Student growth (equity), and Pathways. 'Individual' targets were then to be established at the level of each school, and, in service of these targets, a three-tiered support system would provide central resources to schools according to their level of need.

The Department declared that the School Success Model was about “taking collective action towards driving success for students”, working towards the newly established objective of “shared accountability” (NSW DOE 2020, p.2). This approach appeared to counter the LSLD emphasis on ‘local responsibility’. In contrast, the School Success Model would involve “principals, teachers and corporate teams working together” (NSW DOE 2020, p.2). It committed further to ensuring: “quality support” and “quality time” for schools — bringing together school planning data, new teaching resources and specialist staff to deliver “evidence-based guidance” at the local level (NSW DOE 2020, p.3). Despite positioning itself as a corrective response to LSLD, the initial perception of this reform by key stakeholders such as the Teachers’ Federation and the Secondary Principals’ Council held that it resembled LSLD closely, that it overlooked the key issues with the previous policy approach, and would thus not be addressing the very aspects of work under this reform era that led to its ‘failure’ (Flohm, 2020). These profoundly different interpretations merit further examination.

1.3 Research questions: labour process theory and school leaders’ work

The impact of these reforms and their outcomes on the work of school leaders remains strikingly under-researched, especially given their breadth in such a large bureaucracy, the importance of education, and at the school level, focus on control at the local site. Investigating this gap in the literature requires attention to the details of the work itself through a theoretical lens that captures its relationship to the state and society. Labour process analyses of work in education have been critical to identifying commonalities between the changes to systems of public sector work, specifically in public education, that have occurred in OECD countries. They have explored intensification, deskilling and reduced autonomy: processes that have only continued to evolve as states reconfigure their education systems and their relationships to the private sector (Ozga and Lawn 1988; Smyth 1993; Reid 2003; Carter and Stevenson 2012; Fitzgerald et al. 2018).

Importantly, labour process theory acknowledges that school leaders, because of their possession of a certain degree of managerial responsibilities, cannot be classed in the same manner as those they 'help to control, command and organise', distinguishing the point at which teachers and principals depart from each other in their place within the system that regulates their workplaces (Braverman 1974, p.405). It also offers the capacity to examine school leaders' possession of notionally enhanced authority after devolutionary reforms, and the specific dynamics of their roles as both managers *and* employees who are at once controlled and controlling. This creates the space to examine their resistance, especially in response to reform that has brought sustained challenges to work in schools. Further, it provides a means through which to link this local investigation of control to larger political and economic movements in public sector management.

This thesis extends and deepens inquiries into the impacts of new public management style restructuring. It investigates how these new forms of control are reshaping the labour process of school leaders in public education by seeking to answer the following research questions:

Research Question #1: What challenges are most evident in school leaders' work during the School Success Model policy period?

Research Question #2: What are the mechanisms by which control is exercised over the work of school leaders under the School Success Model?

Research Question #3: How and why do school leaders resist control mechanisms in their labour process?

1.4 Theoretical frameworks: new public management and labour process theory

The application of labour process theory to the analysis of new public management reforms forms a theoretical bridge between the value of these findings and their immediate context. It documents the experiences of school leaders in the public education system after the historic restructuring of their work through two consecutive multi-year reforms, and their value as evidence of the impacts of a global reform movement to public sector work under the neoliberal ideological zeitgeist.

Noting the themes that have emerged in the existing research into work after LSLD around the nature of principals' work, the issue of control is central to devolved work in education. Devolution itself involves the introduction of new responsibility— the policy language of LSLD may not have used the word control, but it did use synonymous words such as 'autonomy' and 'authority', when describing schools' new capacity for decision making (NSW DOE, 2017). Schools, however, are made up of people: responsibilities, autonomy, and authority are possessed and exercised by their employees. As the leaders of schools, accountability for the new responsibilities in the five key areas in which LSLD introduced changes was ultimately borne by principals. This also included decision making processes around resource allocation that continue under the School Success Model. However, principals are not, and cannot be, completely autonomous while still leading an organisation that remains part of a bureaucratic network like the NSW public education system. Their work is still overseen by the state, whether directly through the supervision of the Department of Education, or more indirectly through the regulation of the NSW state government and its politics. Thus, the political nature of public sector work and its role in the control of education is inextricable from its daily realities, consolidating the need for a theoretical lens that accommodates consideration for politics and control in work. So too is the relationship between principals, as pseudo-managers, other school leaders, and their employees— the dynamics between which this research proposes to investigate. These factors support the selection of labour process theory as a theoretical framework to guide the research.

Originating from Marxist analysis, Labour Process Theory is a theoretical framework for analysing the structure of work (Braverman, 1974). It problematises the issue of control and control mechanisms, which, Braverman argues, are always present in work because employers must extract 'surplus value' and workers are able to withhold their full potential when performing their roles (Braverman, 1974). Braverman asserted that management and capital continuously work towards separating employees from the means of conception in their jobs; instead, they are only given the tools to execute their jobs, such that they cannot perform them without the provision of capital and leaving them vulnerable to control and exploitation by their employers (Braverman, 1974). Labour process analysis was popularised as a vehicle for the investigation of work in education after the almost simultaneous emergence of new public management in the 1970s. The growing intensification of tasks, standardisation and increased prescriptions around curricula (what and how to teach) saw researchers concerned with the question of what was happening to work in education (Ozga and Lawn, 1988). For a time, this field became preoccupied with the aforementioned 'proletarianisation thesis', that is, the deskilling process of separating the conception of work from the execution of work. It began to stagnate, failing to reveal anything new about the changing nature of work for educators (Reid, 2003). Labour process theory has since grown beyond this theoretical plateau, and has also deepened to include theorisation around worker resistance to control: a necessary recognition of their agency in any study of the forces that constrain them (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2016).

As a contribution to the ever-growing literature examining the effects of new public management strategies, this thesis offers critical insights into new mechanisms of control being deployed in this changed world of education work, as well as means of resisting them.

Establishing a link between the 'macro' agenda for what is, essentially, a political reform, to the 'micro' realm of industrial outcomes in schools has been absent from existing research. Labour process theory fills this important research gap by grounding the workplace impacts of the reform in its political economy, such that it can be

examined in relation to the broader neoliberal agendas that have catalysed it (Reid, 2003).

1.5 Qualitative methodology and methods

A qualitative research methodology, including a multi-method approach, supported the execution of this study. A rich understanding of every research participant's work context was necessary given the investigation of a profession carried out in such varied environments and with such wide-ranging responsibilities. Schools are a microcosm of the society that surrounds them, creating challenges particular to each school and the social and economic profile of its local community (Smyth, 1995). Furthermore, according to Edmondson and McManus, the less that is known about the research phenomena being studied, the greater the need for open-ended questioning. A qualitative approach allowed me to continue to learn about the emerging phenomena being studied, while retaining the capacity to make adjustments as unexpected needs arose, such as the interaction between the implementation of the School Success Model and the onset of a global pandemic. In particular, a qualitative methodology facilitated these requirements through its compatibility with open ended questioning and the elevation of participants as authorities over their own narratives (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

A qualitative methodology also enables this thesis to make an original contribution to the literature around new public management and post-new public management restructuring in public education by drawing two relevant theoretical frameworks together. The use of both labour process theory and new public management concepts are necessary to establish a link between work at the school level to "broader causes and structures" (Reid, 2003), including the NSW Public Education System, NSW Department of Education, and the political economic context of the state. This rendered the study a 'multi-level' study that requires investigation into the local working contexts of individual

schools, the larger school system in which they are located and the Departmental and governmental powers that interact with them.

A qualitative methodology facilitates this local investigation through one-on-one interviews, while simultaneously accommodating the policy and context analysis necessary to link the findings from these methods of data collection to implications about their political economic context. I conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders, including school leaders: principals, deputy principals, and head teachers; Directors (principals' Departmental line managers); support specialists employed by the Departmental bureaucracy, and general teaching staff. The high schools from which participants were selected reflect a range of diverse characteristics, such as a mix of single-sex and co-educational schools, specialist schools (such as performing-arts and sports-focused schools) differing in socio-economic status, as well as schools located in both metropolitan and regional areas. This purposive, heterogeneous sampling strategy was employed to recruit participant schools and staff members that reflected both the diversity and geography of the NSW public education system (Patton, 2005).

1.6 Research Contributions

This study utilises new public management concepts alongside labour process theory to analyse its findings — a novel approach in education work research, and one that has been formulated in response to the findings of the pilot study preceding this thesis. The work of school leaders under public sector restructuring has been significantly under-researched both globally and in the Australian context. Both the new public management literature (Christensen and Laegreid, 2022) and labour process literature (Ozga and Lawn, 1988) have neglected the challenges and tensions in this pseudo-managerial work — casting those in these leadership roles as uncritical pawns of management. This thesis is designed to deepen understanding of new public management and its implications through the capabilities of labour process theory. This theoretical application allows for the investigation of new forms of control in the work

of public sector managers *and* resistance to this control — overcoming an empirical and theoretical shortcoming in education work research through a closer investigation of school leaders' 'constrained' agency (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010).

Labour process analysis was once criticised for its preoccupation with demonstrating how all mechanisms of control were ultimately working towards stripping workers of their role in the empowering conceptual and mental aspects of work, such that they could only 'execute' work rather than conceive of it themselves (Reid, 2003). By applying labour process theory to the impacts of new public management reform, this thesis opens up a novel theoretical avenue in two ways. The first is by exploring the ways in which these control mechanisms have evolved within and in response to reform iterations. Second, it identifies the ways in which these evolutions in control have impacted school leaders' work directly, through reshaping it, and indirectly, in the ways school leaders have responded to these changes.

Furthermore, its application in a new empirical context, the recently restructured public education sector in NSW, will illustrate the ways in which labour process theory can explain the work of school leaders and be augmented to retain its valuable elements in analysing work and control. This context lies within a still-broader picture of public-private sector relations. The public sector has long been distinguished from the private sector by its provision of goods and services that benefit the whole of society, and, in many cases, do not prevent those who cannot pay for these goods and services from accessing them. In contrast, the private sector, while not necessarily devoid of communitarian motivators, is free to remain profit-driven. The gradual implementation of neoliberal approaches to governance, by its very definition, has seen private sector practices introduced in the public sector— thus transforming the practices *and* the nature of work in a sector that notionally exists in service of the public interest (Greve and Hodge, 2010).

This thesis will therefore aid in better understanding the outcomes of a major reform to the delivery of public education. Understanding the impacts of the reform will illuminate the ways in which this work may be inhibiting or aiding Australian school leaders, offering insight into what changes may need to be made to improve their working conditions and, subsequently, the quality of public education. The identification of new forms of control in service-based work will also be of value to future research into public sector work beyond education, such as healthcare and community services, which continue to undergo parallel processes of restructuring (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017).

1.7 Thesis structure

This thesis consists of eleven chapters, which provide a detailed analysis of the tensions in school leaders' work after the implementation of both new public management and post-new public management style reforms in the NSW Public Education System.

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the context and motivation driving this research, the research questions to be addressed, the methodological approach of the research, its empirical and theoretical contributions, and the structure of this thesis.

Following this chapter, Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the implications of both new public management reforms and post-new public management reforms to public sector work and the work of education. It begins by canvassing the changes to teachers' work, including the effects of contemporary reform technologies such as assessment standardisation and the quantification of performance management. It discusses what is known about the work of school leaders, and the ways in which this has been reshaped by the neoliberalism underpinning such reforms. It clarifies the need for closer investigation of the work of school leaders due to their unique position at the centre of

these reforms and the lack of representation of their experience in the global education reform literature.

Chapter 3 establishes the theoretical and conceptual framework for the thesis. It makes the case for the adoption of labour process theory to connect the changes to school leaders' work at the local level to broader neoliberal political and economic agendas, and problematises control as a key issue of contestation in the work of school leaders. It argues that principals in particular hold a unique class position, and considers whether their role needs to be reconceptualised given the evolution of their labour process under neoliberal reform. Out of this discussion emerges the importance of understanding the ways in which school leaders, who cannot be viewed as managers in the traditional sense, may resist these control mechanisms.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach of this research, orienting the research questions through an explanation of the research design. It rationalises the two research methods: policy and context analysis, and semi structured interviews. It itemises the documents analysed, explains the sampling strategy, and reviews the development of the interview protocol. It reiterates the suitability of labour process theory as a theoretical framework to support the investigation of the research questions. Finally, it discusses the limitations of its methods, the strategies employed to mitigate these limitations, and the challenges faced while carrying out the research.

Chapter 5 analyses the policy context in NSW public education as the first step to answering the three research questions driving this thesis. This examination is necessary to understand the long term trajectory of reform to the work of school leaders and the impacts that the findings chapters explore. First, it explains the scope of the original Local Schools, Local Decisions (LSLD) reform, highlighting the ways in which it reflected new public management strategies and GERM style policy technologies. It compares the narratives that emerged around the 'failure' of Local Schools, Local Decisions, including the implications of the reform on work in schools.

Having established the context that both preceded and enabled the School Success Model, the objectives of this new reform are considered alongside the failed reform it aims to correct. It argues that despite the School Success Model claiming to act as a corrective response to earlier reforms, it has only continued a reform agenda emblematic of new public management ideals, prioritising cost cutting and the assessment of educational performance through narrow, quantified means.

Chapter 6 discusses the empirical, policy-related findings of school leaders' experiences in relation to the School Success Model's commitment to 'Shared Accountability', 'Quality Support for Schools', and 'Quality Time for Schools'. Utilising management new public management concepts, it presents the experiences of work for school leaders under the School Success Model, including the disparities between the claimed reform objectives and the realities of this work. It also discusses the impact of both the COVID-19 pandemic and a persistent, state-wide teacher shortage in NSW, factors that interacted with the implementation of the reform model to produce challenging effects.

Chapters 7 and 8 both apply labour process theory to school leaders' experiences of work under the reform to identify and discuss emergent mechanisms of control over their labour process. Chapter 7 focuses on routine mechanisms of control, illuminating the everyday pressures introduced to the work of school leaders, while Chapter 8 articulates the structural mechanisms of control that function more covertly.

Chapter 9 presents findings on school leaders' resistance to these control mechanisms, noting that control remains a site of constant negotiation, especially at the point of local school management. School leaders are found to enact resistance to control in the interests of their staff and students, creating the conditions for school-wide resistance to Departmental policies and initiatives when they perceive them to undermine the purpose of education.

Chapter 10 presents an integrated analysis of themes that emerged from the overall findings of the thesis. It introduces the original theoretical concept of 'false-proletarianisation', articulating the dualistic process by which a neoliberal policy setting formally intensifies and degrades school leaders' work while covertly depending upon them to perform complex conceptual labour.

Chapter 11 concludes the thesis. It reiterates the empirical and theoretical contributions of the thesis, and makes policy recommendations regarding both school leaders' work and the administration of public education in NSW. Further, it proposes ideas for further research into the reshaping of public education under neoliberal policy regimes.

CHAPTER TWO: NEOLIBERALISM AND AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC EDUCATION

2.1 Introduction

This chapter establishes the neoliberal context of global reform to public sector work, in order to first situate the changes to Australian public education within the broader setting of government service restructuring. It discusses the origins and characteristics of the new public management reform doctrine, as well as post-new public management, which encompasses the different reform approaches that have followed new public management. It situates these changes to the work of education in relation to the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), the parallel phenomenon in which education has been remodelled in service to international competition and standardisation. It then canvasses the impact of both new public management and GERM on Australian public education prior to the implementation of the School Success Model in NSW to consider the ways in which the work of school leaders has been reshaped. Building a foundational understanding of the participants of this research, it discusses what is known about the work of school leaders in the neoliberal context of education reform, explaining the tensions inherent to their work as it now encompasses social and managerial objectives.

2.2 The neoliberal zeitgeist: understanding the global and national ideological context

Neoliberalism has redefined the relationship between the state, society and the economy through its veneration of the market. It relies on market activity to guide the challenges of resource allocation in the economy and society, its proponents claiming it functions as a means of “optimising social harmony” (Ward, 2012, p.02). Consequently, hallmarks of neoliberalism have included the deregulation of markets, and the removal

of central controls over the global flow of finance and trading (Connell, Fawcett and Meagher, 2009).

Amidst these changes, the public sector in many OECD and Western nations has undergone significant transformation. Historically, the basis of the public sector has been to provide a population with assistance in the fundamental areas in which we have relied upon being offered support by our community — such as health, education, utilities, infrastructure, and social services. It ensures that the basic human rights of people, as citizens, are met by the state. Driven by ideals of universal equity, public services are not run for profit; instead, resources are distributed with the aim of ensuring that all citizens, no matter their means, can access the same standard of service according to their needs. Neoliberal ideologues have, however, turned their focus on public services for their potential to be marketised.

The neoliberal ideas upon which new public management is based promise efficiency, freedom of choice and consumer empowerment through fostering competition and private sector conditions in all aspects of the economy. However, discrepancies exist between the “utopian idealism of free-market narratives”, and the “uneven realities” of the restructuring initiatives and government programs spearheaded by neoliberalism (Peck, Brenner and Theodore, 2017, p.1). The term ‘neoliberalism’ itself is accompanied by a kind of cultural elusiveness. Amongst even the strongest advocates of this ideological movement exists the tendency to employ a changing language of euphemisms, all centred around an economic aspiration towards efficiency, decentralisation and limited regulation administered by a small state (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015). The ostensibly deliberate refusal of its own constituents to compose an official definition has meant that consensus does not always exist about what neoliberalism is. Consequently, neoliberalism is flexible – in what it can claim to be, what it actually is, and what outcomes it creates (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015).

The Australian public sector has undergone privatisation and new public management restructuring for the better part of thirty years (Connell, Fawcett and Meagher, 2009).

With the free market now a 'central image', the neoliberal project has sought to erode and transform public industries including health, welfare and education such that they have become new arenas for private profit (Connell, Fawcett and Meagher, 2009; Dow et al., 2002). Nationally, a dual health system has been established where public healthcare has become 'residual' to private care fuelled by government subsidy, the financialisation of insurance and the patronage of the wealthy (Connell, Fawcett and Meagher, 2009). Similarly, our public education systems — increasingly under-resourced — have long been dwarfed by private school sectors that have continued to grow through their capacity to turn profits from their tuition fees and capture donations from their affluent alumni, as well as the consistent receipt of a greater level of public funding than any other private education sector in the world (Beazley and Cassidy, 2023; Marginson, 1997). Despite educating less than 20% of Australian students, private schools received over 80% of the over AU\$2 billion in increased funding to schools over the last decade (Goss, 2019). Competition, choice, entrepreneurship and individualism, themes at the forefront of the neoliberal movement (Connell, Fawcett and Meagher, 2009), are evident in these general changes to the face of the public sector on a national scale.

2.3 New public management and 'post' new public management:

Why is understanding the effects of these reform movements important for understanding what is happening to school leaders' work? Since the 1970s, new public management has represented a paradigm shift in OECD countries towards neoliberal ideals of efficiency through the adoption of business-like practices, and claimed attempts to 'reduce [the straitjacket of] bureaucracy' in the public sector (Diefenbach 2009). Exercises in restructuring continue to transform this work, and social services, including education, have undergone new public management style reforms later than other aspects of the public sector, as a wealth of scholarship reveals (for example, Klenk and Reiter, 2019).

Different typologies exist for conceptualising the elements common to new public management reform doctrines. Dunleavy et al. identify three components broadly relevant across all public services: disaggregation, competition, and the use of incentives (2011). Understanding the nature and effects of these contemporary trends in the management of public services contributes to our understanding of the way school leaders' work is being reshaped in NSW, as we begin to see in Chapter 5. These cannot be understood without paying attention to the political processes and structures that determine them, and even the influence of other governments and international bodies, such as management consultancies (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

This approach to public policy has seen politicians crafting strategic visions and goals for the public services they administer, regardless of their technical expertise in the area, while public servants are responsible for meeting these goals through the implementation of policy reform. There is a notable divorce between the institutional knowledge of employees in the public service and the governments who oversee them: consultation regarding the elements of new public management reform or their practical impact on work has overwhelmingly been sought from external management consultants, rather than the public servants whose work is being reshaped (Lapsley, 2009). Given the role of school leaders as local decision makers, the political origin of reform initiatives must be kept in mind when considering effects on work at the level of the school. While principals may be responsible for the enactment of policy, this does not necessarily mean that they, nor pedagogical leaders of any kind, played a role in the development of policy. Moreover, even when consultation is requested by government, or feedback is provided by public servants regarding new public management style reforms, there is evidence they are ignored (Rentner et al., 2016).

New public management doctrines have been described as appearing as if they can provide a "government in a box" (Pollitt and Bouckært, 2011). Often sold with the alluring promise of quick, systematic reform, they claim to overhaul layers of bureaucracy and replace them with private sector-like efficiency. However, the research

tells us that it is not that simple — effective public service reform cannot be achieved by some universal recipe with discrete steps. Although the importation of ‘business-like’ practices to public sector work is by no means a new phenomenon, and even though they are united by neoliberal ideology, there is scepticism in the literature around the idea that new public management style reforms have been simply borrowed, transferred or diffused (Gulson et al. 2017; Silova, 2012). Local politics and diversity between settings are thought to mediate differences in the development of approaches to public governance in every specific context (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012).

This makes clear the importance of continuous efforts to understand the ways in which new public management restructuring is enacted in different contexts, because the ways in which it is enacted are continuously evolving *and* dependent on these different contexts, and thus so are the impacts of these changes to work. Building on limited attempts to address this is one of the core tasks of this thesis. New public management reforms are not introduced into a vacuum, nor a clean slate: they must necessarily be “grafted onto existing structures”, and so cannot be reproduced identically between different public services. In their realisation, their relation to each other amounts to a “loose assembly of globally circulating discourses, situated practices and normative commitments” (Wilkins et al. 2019, p.148). It is only in studying their actual effects, with rich consideration for the unique contexts in which they are enacted, that constructive insights can emerge around their outcomes.

Because of some of the aforementioned criticisms in the many years since the introduction of new public management, a reactive reform movement has emerged. Described by scholars as post-new public management, these reforms refer to policy responses aimed at addressing issues *caused* by new public management reforms, such as the lack of state control over organisations fragmented by devolution and decentralisation (Christensen, 2012). Post-new public management has been associated with the resurgence of public values and re-democratisation of public services through vertical re-integration — reversing the processes of decentralisation (Bryson et al. 2014, Reiter and Klenk, 2019). Post-new public management has also referred, more

generally, to reforms that have followed any original new public management reforms — noting that they are not always attempts to reverse or correct new public management reforms (Christensen, 2012).

Studies of the evolution of policy from initial new public management reforms onwards suggest that they are not replaced, rather, even when followed by new reform trends, their legacy endures (Christensen and Lægheid, 2007). It has also been argued that neoliberalism is an ongoing project that is subject to constant reinvention in its efforts to maintain the hegemony of capitalist market rule (Harvey, 2007). As a policy manifestation of this ideology, iterations of new public management reforms can be expected to possess constitutive differences that develop out of and in response to their specific contexts (Peck, Brenner and Theodore, 2018). This makes clear the importance of continuous efforts to understand the ways in which new public management restructuring is enacted in different contexts, because the ways in which it is enacted are continuously evolving *and* dependent on these different contexts. So too are the impacts of these changes on work itself, but we know much less about this. The next section will begin to explore the work issues and as the thesis will demonstrate the connections between new public management and the workplace.

2.4 New public management at work

What do we know about how work in education has changed under new public management and how best to analyse it? Sahlberg argues that, with the world in competition with itself as a result of globalisation, the same homogenising economic forces that have permeated global markets have come to transform education (Sahlberg, 2016). In contemporary times this has been referred to as the Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM — but has been observable for decades, with Levin first identifying an ‘epidemic’ of educational policy reform (Levin, 1998). National interests now include the desire for the output of education systems to rank highly in the globalised league table of academic performance, and corporate management

approaches have been introduced to achieve these outcomes. Many scholars, and Pasi Sahlberg (2016) foremost, argue that this aspect of neoliberalism has unsettled the historical priorities of education that sit outside of, or do not acquiesce with strategies designed for, profit driven environments.

GERM's shift towards increasing the quantified measurability of performance in schools reveals the relationship that exists between political interests and the reform of education. Any form of public education is inherently political, underpinned by ideology and designed to ensure a nation's young people are fit for participation in work and society (Reid, 2020). Beyond this, however, the standardised tools that have been developed to measure educational outcomes worldwide, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment, provide convenient benchmarks for national policymakers (Sahlberg, 2016). This primes education to be used as a means of generating political favour, or manufacturing notions of political performance through any ostensible improvement or decline in these performance indicators.

Three elements have been identified as common to GERM, new public management, or otherwise more broadly neoliberal reforms being implemented across systems of education around the world (Ball, 2003). These 'policy technologies' include marketisation, referring to the introduction of competition into the sector; managerialism, promoting a shift to the management of schools by corporate organisational logics, rather than technical pedagogical expertise; and performativity, the belief that 'good' educational practice can be achieved by adherence to set rules (Ball, 2003, p.215). Although these policy technologies are combined differently in different contexts, their consistent implementation alongside each other highlights their deep interrelation. Elements of implementation can include obvious artefacts such as tests and procedures, but also more organisational components such as the strategies or incentives used to motivate teachers, how they are delivered ongoing professional learning, or the hierarchies constructed in schools and education systems. (Ball, 2003). Their manifestations involve the organisation of teachers and the wider educational

workforce into “functioning networks of power” that can be used to achieve political and ideological aims (Ball, 2003, p.216).

As the literature examining education reform has developed, its focus has shifted from the implementation of policy to the *enactment* of policy (Singh, Heimans and Glasswell, 2014). Through greater consideration of the context around policy, it expands the concept of implementation, accounting for the process by which education policy is transformed from rhetoric on a page to material changes in a school. Ball, Maguire and Braun first theorised that this consists of dual processes: policy interpretation and policy translation (2011). Policy interpretation refers to the initial reading of policy texts, and includes the means whereby sense is made of these texts — noting the subjectivity of meaning and scope for difference between readings (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2011). Policy translation refers to the subsequent process of ‘doing’ policy — the practical realisation of policy within a school, which must necessarily interact with and be shaped by the unique conditions of each school (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2011). When studying the impacts of reform to education, this highlights the need to examine the specific way in which system-wide changes can manifest particularly at the local level.

Four overlapping contextual dimensions influence the translation of policy: *situated contexts*, referring to the specific context of the school site itself; *professional contexts*, including the values and culture of the school; *material contexts*, including financial, budgetary and infrastructure related factors; and *external contexts*, including the expectations of the broader policy environment, such as academic targets (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2011). Through qualitative interviews, the methodological approach of this thesis generated the capacity for rich insight into each of these dimensions and their interplay within each participants’ school. Policy interpretation and translation cannot be understood without detailed contextual understanding; it is precisely the unique circumstances in which a policy is brought to life upon which its outcomes are ultimately contingent.

In the Australian case, GERM and new public management modes of reform to education have been realised on both a national and state basis. Overarching the individual systems of public education in every Australian state is a federal education 'strategy', administered by the Australian Department of Education, and comprised of various reform technologies (Thompson and Cook, 2017). The key research issues arising have been ...

The foundation of this strategy includes a mandated national curriculum, first implemented in 2014, but subject to ongoing reform and development (ADOE, 2023). Most recognisably, it includes a national standardised testing program NAPLAN, and a website, called My School, where the testing results of every school are displayed and ranked in the interests of "transparency and accountability" (ACARA, 2023). This is administered by a statutory authority, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, that monitors the national system (ACARA, 2023). Standardised testing and the publication of school results have functioned to marketise and introduce competition between schools within the public system, encouraging them to be assessed by their results and enforcing 'performativity' — teachers must organise their labour around the achievement of these public results (Ball, 2009). A private company, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, is responsible for the development of 'teaching standards', which not only resembles an additional policy technology as categorised by Ball (2003), but further represents the inculturation of the public system with private regulation.

The national education strategy is now supported ideologically by various bodies which facilitate its reproduction. The government organisations and authorities that have been established to administer the implementation of these national technologies exist in relation to a network of further policy actors (Thompson, Savage, and Lingard, 2016). These include not-for-profit-organisations, edu-businesses, and think tanks that all share a common interest in, and mobilise resources to facilitate, the reform of education. Further, standardised testing is a common vehicle of accountability in education, and a common element of the global reform movement (Thompson and

Cook, 2017). It functions as a means to 'steer schools at a distance', allowing for an 'opening' of the classroom through technology and metrics — a site of work otherwise imperceptible to those outside the contemporaneous delivery of education. If public education is to continue its transformation towards marketisation, then it must be quantifiable. This 'opening' of the classroom may be assumed to create metrics for those outside the profession of teaching itself, those without technical or pedagogical expertise, to assess what goes on in schools — to participate in a market.

There has been important research into the impact of this manifestation of neoliberalism. Under this reformed national education policy framework, Thompson and Cook (2017) describe the 'arrhythmia' felt by teachers and principals Australia wide. Firstly, as they contend with what they conceptualise as the 'acceleration' of their work, educators universally feel they need to do more in less time (Thompson and Cook, 2017). Secondly, teachers face misalignment with the evolving expectations placed upon their work; they feel they are at once expected to value the "unique development of each student" while also being directed to assess students through blunt quantitative indicators, and to prioritise preparation for national standardised tests over the specific learning needs of their classes (Thompson and Cook, 2017, p.10). This rhythmic imbalance continuously inhibits a sense of stability or even achievability in their work: not only are the workloads of principals and teachers increasingly demanding, they are forced to negotiate a constant tension between what is expected of them. When the reconciliation of competing interests forms the basis of which their performance is assessed, it raises the question of whether educators can ever reasonably secure a sense of their own competence. Instead, it appears they are jostled between impossible expectations — if we begin with the assumption that principals and teachers are never in total control of their own work, the disorientation of this arrhythmia must surely be considered when examining what limited degree of control they actually might possess at all.

At the level of states and territories, the predominant mechanisms by which new public management, imbued with neoliberal ideals, has reformed Australian public education

systems include devolution, decentralisation and recentralisation (Martin et al., 1994). More specifically, the devolution of responsibility from the centre to the local school, the decentralisation of decision-making, resources and support, and the recentralisation of power, performance management, and policy decisions by the state. In the 1990s, an ‘alternative philosophy’ emerged to counter the institution of the comprehensive Australian public school as an essential priority of the state (Martin et al., 1994). Rather than a centrally administered system of equity, aimed to provide each student with the same standard of education at any school, it was argued that the market-based characteristics of choice and competition should shape the landscape of education available. These ideas materialised in a policy shift that affected all Australian states, setting in motion separate timelines of different, but universally neoliberal, new public management style reform trajectories.

In Western Australia, the state administered ‘Independent Public Schools’ Program represents the most advanced devolution of school governance in public Australian education — on an opt-in basis, direct centralised management has been replaced by contractual agreements between the government and individual schools since 2009 (Fitzgerald and Rainnie, 2012). Queensland has also implemented a modified version of this program (Wilkins, 2016). In Victoria, business-like practices such as responsibility for resource management, finances and budgeting have been delegated to individual schools since the 1990s (Blackmore et al. 1996). In South Australia, a recent study found “excessive government initiatives” have led to “competing and conflicting demands for change” and intensified workloads (Windle et al. 2022, p.31).

Despite their local differences, the implementation of these changes to public education work has brought shared concerns around increasing workloads and decreasing time to focus on the task of teaching amidst growing administrative demands. Reforms of this nature have been criticised for their focus on introducing marketisation and competition in the name of restructuring and cost cutting in the delivery of a vital public service — the foundational aims of which have historically been to provide universal access and equity (Fitzgerald 2011).

Prior to any reforms focused solely on school management and autonomy, neoliberal shifts towards the marketisation of NSW public education functioned to entrench social inequality within schools (Fitzgerald and Rainnie, 2012). In 1989, the Department fragmented the almost entirely comprehensive schooling system, introducing elements of choice and competition to student enrolment. From the 1960s to the late 1980s, public schools enrolled all students within their geographically zoned catchment area, except for a small number of academically selective schools which admitted the state's highest performing students (Campbell and Sherington, 2006). Restructuring oversaw a significant increase in the number of these academically selective schools; as well as the formation of specialist schools for students seeking enrichment in specialised areas of skill such as sports, performing arts, technology, and languages; and, in some cases, the amalgamation of existing primary and secondary schools to form multi-campus colleges that enrol students continuously from kindergarten to their final year of school (Esson et al., 2002). As a consequence of this disruption to the comprehensive model of schooling, the heightened social and behavioural challenges within communities of lower socio-economic status began to concentrate in particular schools, while the diversity of each student population reduced (Considine, 2012). The proliferation of so many academically selective schools ensured that the brightest students in every community were extracted, and specialist schools further skimmed students with varied talents and interests (Considine, 2012). In 2023, specialist schools made up 21% of all public schools in NSW (CESE, 2024, p.11). This has had significant implications for school leaders and teachers, such that the experience of work between two schools can now be so disparate it has been likened to working in a different labour market altogether (Considine, 2012). Over time, this process of differentiation, institutionalised by Departmental policy, has severely compromised the original vision of a universal educational experience for all students within the public system (Junor, 1991). Demand for enrolment at selective and specialist schools is high, with students competing for places, while many comprehensive schools — particularly those in disadvantaged areas — must fight for enrolments (Considine, 2012). This continues to shape the working environment for school leaders and their staff, as the needs and capabilities of a school's

student population, as well as its local community, substantially determine the working conditions in each individual school.

2.5 New public management and the work of school leaders

A great deal of research has asserted the role of principals as agents of change, crucial to the execution of neoliberal restructuring, but significant gaps remain in describing and explaining their work. The existing literature remains mostly limited to one dimensional representations of school leaders, focused on their alignment with government interests or self-interest in securing local power.

Contributions to the study of Australian education across different states highlight the complexities in understanding the work of school leaders. In Victorian schools, the new managerial nature of the principal was emphasised in order to “drive a wedge” between principals and their staff (Pascoe & Pascoe, 1988). Ryan describes principals in South Australia as “political accomplices”, who have reformed the relationship between the state and society through their position as representatives of both the government and their school communities (1993, p.167). In reviewing the national shift towards educational devolution, Smyth asserts that those in positions of educational leadership have been “complicit” in delivering models of self-management that contradict goals of communitarianism – instead, facilitating the state’s slow exit from the social and economic responsibility of administering the public education system (2011).

Australian education research has also illuminated the changing role of the principal in a devolved setting. Dinham et al. report that as a result of dramatically increased managerial responsibilities, Australian principals across several states, including New South Wales, have reported a reduced ability to design and execute instructional leadership. Instructional leadership for principals entails what they themselves view to

be the core purpose of their role – leadership focused on the professional development of staff as educators, and the improvement of student educational outcomes (Dinham et. al, 2018). This research also produced accounts of principals who believed many responsibilities of their role falls outside what is formally expected of them, indicating a discrepancy between what principals are reasonably able to do and what is actually necessitated in this new climate of increased accountability (Dinham et. al, 2018). Most recently, research into the last decade of reforms in NSW captured the perspective of teachers in NSW on school leaders. Principals under the Local Schools, Local Decisions reform era were described by their own staff as ‘gutless, DEC stooges unwilling to stand up against political change” (Fitzgerald et. al, 2018, p.15). Absent from these narratives and analyses is sufficient consideration of the actions and experiences of principals themselves.

We need to recognise that in a bureaucratic governance structure such as that of the NSW Department of Education, the accountabilities of school leaders are manifold despite the natural limitations of their managerial prerogative in their roles as public servants. Examination of this tension is particularly warranted given the established perspective that principals have been active accomplices in the implementation of reform that, when their voices have been accounted for, they have vehemently denounced (Dabaja, 2019).

Educational management literature has cast light on the contested nature of school leadership as a political, ideological and theoretical concept. Traditional notions of leadership, especially corporate definitions of leadership denoting the domination or hegemony of one individual or group over another, do not accurately represent the task of educational leadership (Smyth, 1989). While many different types of leadership can be exercised in schools, a spectrum exists between corporate management styles focused on administration on one end, and the facilitative, collaborative oversight of processes that uphold, above all, the “integrity of a community” rather than specific outcomes (Watkins, 1989, p.32).

In public management literature, questions of managerial autonomy remain at the forefront of policy discussions. The provision of greater autonomy to local managers has long been argued to increase efficiency within public agencies, ‘freeing up’ those at the frontline to utilise their local expertise when making decisions (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2005). Rationalised by this argument, an oft-stated aim of new public management reform in many different contexts has been the deregulation or devolution of autonomy to local managers. Despite this, such reforms have not actually led to increased autonomy (Hood, 2000; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2005). This mirrors the case of principals in the NSW public education system after the Local Schools, Local Decisions reform, where devolutionary reform was ultimately notional in many ways, as bureaucratic control was actually tightened in key areas of principals’ work (Dabaja, 2023). Bjørnholt, Boye and Hansen (2022) argue that managers’ capacity to exercise managerial autonomy is contingent upon their perception of whether they possess autonomy in the first instance. This suggests that there is a relational element to what school leaders believe is possible — foregrounding the importance of their incorporation in consultation and policy development processes.

While public education has opened itself up to private sector influences and practice, and has been continuously pushed into doing more with less of the public resources on which it depends, it remains committed to fulfil a social purpose. This is a fundamental characteristic of school leadership to account for when attempting to understand their work as managers — although public management literature bears relevance to the ways in which their work is organised, the ways in which they are distinct from other managers must be acknowledged. The Department cites equity as a central focus, and refers to its “moral purpose” as “the enabler of equality and opportunity for all young people” (DOE, 2021a, p.1) — an articulation of its singular role in the provision of a service that remains, at least in part, motivated by a mission outside of markets and profit. The social and communitarian aspects of public education are also explicitly acknowledged in the Department’s expectations of school leadership. Its role description for principals communicates that their primary purpose is to “prepare young people for rewarding lives as engaged citizens in a complex and dynamic society by maximising the learning and wellbeing progress of every student every year” (DOE,

2018, p.1). The importation of corporate, performance-focused ideals by new public management and GERM reforms has generated friction against these existing social objectives of school leadership.

The organisational remit of school leaders now encompasses a vast range of responsibilities, with principals stipulated to be the 'leading learner' of their school (DOE, 2018, p.3). Principals are accountable for 'leading teaching and learning', requiring that they drive progress in the skills of all staff, and the quality of education delivered in their schools (DOE, 2018). This is an instructional form of leadership grounded in pedagogy: the practice of teaching itself, tying principal accountability to both the performance of their staff as educators, *and* the academic performance of their students. Principals are also required to lead improvement, innovation and change, and ultimately, to lead the management of the school — the operational, business-like elements of running an organisation (such as budgeting, resource allocation and administration) that run concurrently to the mammoth task of teaching and learning (DOE, 2018). Beyond the quality of their schools as organisations, the skills of their staff, and the academic outcomes of their students, principals are held accountable for the emotional quality of their leadership, responsible for 'developing [themselves] and others' (DOE, 2018, p.3). This requires that they are both empathetic and supportive of their students and staff, as well as committed to their own development and wellbeing. Further, they are accountable for 'engaging and working with the community', incorporating collaboration and understanding of the culture around the school into the delivery of education (DOE, 2018). The expectations of school leadership — what it is, and what it must achieve — have become numerous and highly varied. While at face value, these expectations do not immediately indicate contradiction or incongruity, they raise questions around the practicality of negotiating both the social and community focused aspects of education with the more operational, administrative ones.

2.6 Conclusion

In a policy context where reform continues to reshape public services in the image of neoliberal interests, the changing nature of Australian education sets the backdrop for this study of school leaders' work. In NSW, both new public management and GERM style reforms have introduced competition and managerialism to a public system that now aims to reconcile private sector-like policy technologies with social and communitarian aims. The voices of school leaders, at the junction between changing public bureaucracies, the state, and local communities, are underrepresented in examinations of the impacts of these neoliberal reforms on schools. This chapter has canvassed the political and economic setting in which public education has undergone transformation, and sharpened focus on school leaders as a key stakeholder in these shifting processes.

CHAPTER THREE: LABOUR PROCESS THEORY AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces labour process theory which, along with the new public management literature reviewed in Chapter 2, provides the theoretical framework of this thesis. It first reviews the origins and purpose of labour process theory, before discussing its historical contribution to studies of education work through the development of the proletarianisation thesis. It then establishes the class position of school leaders, addressing the question of whether the managerial work of school leaders is indeed a labour process, and consequently, why it should be studied. To lay the analytical foundation for the findings chapters to follow, it introduces labour process concepts capable of articulating the nature and consequences of control mechanisms in the work of school leaders. It then reviews the theoretical basis for identifying forms of resistance to these control mechanisms, establishing that despite the limitations of early labour process analyses of education work, which overlooked resistance, teachers and school leaders are not merely passive subjects of these control mechanisms.

3.2 Assessing labour process theory and its contribution to education work research

Building upon the Marxist analysis of capitalism, labour process theory begins with the observation that human capital —workers— possess the ability to withhold their full labour potential when carrying out work (Braverman, 1974). Labour process theory identifies that out of this potential arises a perpetual problem for management: how to extract the maximum amount of labour possible from workers (Braverman, 1974). Conceptually referred to as the ‘indeterminacy of labour’, the inability to precisely measure this potential underpins the relationship between management and the control of employees. Methods of control provide a means to elicit greater effort from the indeterminate source of human potential, and thus form a key element of the labour

process of workers — the ways in which work is organised to produce use values (Braverman, 1974).

Notwithstanding its original focus on capitalists' waged-labour, labour process theory also allows us to view public education as a site of contestation through an understanding of the ways in which the state exercises control in and over this work. What is taught in schools is a matter of great significance to society, subject to constant negotiation by social, political, and economic forces. Through enculturation, school prepares young people to enter the workforce and engage in productive labour. Control over the values, beliefs, and expectations communicated to students in classrooms is therefore an ideological asset of the state (Althusser, 1970). Labour process theory offers a lens through which to examine the work of teaching beyond educational practices and outcomes, situating it in the wider system of economic organisation as a function of the state. Considering the labour process of teaching as not separate to, but inextricable from education, enables an integrative focus on its multidimensional properties while investigating both the means and the ends to which the work of school leaders is shaped.

Following the emergence of new public management in the 1970-80s (discussed in Chapter 2), labour process theory assumed a dominant place in analyses of the changes in educational work (Reid, 2003). By the 1980s, momentum had already gathered behind the global movement towards education reform. Ozga (1998) identified the cumulative effect of this movement, across many different policy initiatives, to be an increase in central control over the work of teaching. Given that new public management was and remains driven by the application of private sector style management to public sector work, this prompted enquiries into the introduction of new forms of management and control within education. Systematic workload intensification, referring to the expectation that workers complete more tasks with the same amount of resources, was observed amongst teachers in the neoliberalising UK, alongside a reduction in their autonomy (Ozga and Lawn, 1998). Heightened prescriptions around curricula, teaching procedures and testing began to erode

teachers' capacity to develop and implement their own pedagogy (Apple, 1981). In turn, this was widely linked to deskilling: the intellectual components of their work diminished, while new managerial structures amplified supervision and ensured greater efficiency and value to be captured by the state (Ozga and Lawn, 1998). No longer provided the same level of autonomy over their classrooms — what to teach, and how to teach it— the technical skills required by teachers began to contract, and in turn, so did the space to develop them.

3.3 Proletarianisation, degradation and deskilling in education work

These findings led to the adoption of the 'proletarianisation thesis' in labour process analyses of education, also referred to as the 'technification of teaching' thesis, or the 'degradation thesis' (Reid, 2003; Troman, 1996). Observing the shift of the working class towards employment in the services sector that occurred in the United States during the second half of the 20th Century, Braverman refuted the idea that this change was simply a process of class mobility. Instead, he argued that the organisation of service work could, and often did, possess close parallels to that of manufacturing work or other physical labour typically performed by the proletariat class (1974). Even in white collar work, the principles of scientific management were now being applied in order to separate control over the mental aspects of work from their physical execution (Braverman, 1974). Drawing on Braverman's projection that all work would be controlled by the deskilling that eventuates from separating conception from execution, analyses of teaching initially presented evidence of this process in education (Reid, 2003). This affirmed that the methods of capitalist control identified by Marx in unskilled work were now, as Braverman predicted, encroaching upon knowledge work, (Densmore, 1987; Harris, 1990; Ozga and Lawn, 1988). With less scope to carry out their work with originality and conceptual discretion, or make decisions in their own classrooms, deskilling was degrading the work of teachers to more closely subordinate them to the interests of the state.

Extending this hypothesis, labour process analysis further identified the professionalisation of teachers as a tool of ideological control. The professionalisation of teachers —the regulated training of teaching work and teacher identities— was associated with a narrowing and standardisation of skills, the internalisation of middle-class values, and strategic attempts to shift teachers away from leftist ideology and, in particular, unionism (Troman, 1996; Bergen, 1988). Teachers appeared to be becoming technicians simply executing tasks: no longer valued for their craft, but for their ability to carry out work plans developed elsewhere and entirely without their involvement (Apple, 2021).

Despite the consensus around the proletarianisation thesis within the studies of education that followed the onset of new public management, no universal or standardised proletarianisation of state workers has eventuated within education or in the wider public sector. (Reid, 2003; Carter, 1997). Reid attributes the preoccupation of labour process analyses of education with the proletarianisation thesis to its eventual abandonment in the education literature, but maintains that even in the absence of a uniform degradation of work, control mechanisms in the labour process of teachers continue to evolve, and therefore warrant updated examination. Furthermore, the proletarianisation thesis has been undermined over time because of contradictory findings that, as their work has intensified, teachers are expected to possess skills *beyond* what they have before — a reality supported by McGrath-Champ et al.'s large-scale study of teachers in NSW (2018). Grugulis and Lloyd (2017) note the duality with which workers can be required to upskill while other aspects of their working conditions decline. Rather than a limited focus on theorising general skill trajectories, similar to the trap of the original proletarianisation thesis, they invite researchers to hold space for the expansion of skill while examining the degradation of job quality more broadly as a result of changes to the labour process (Grugulis and Lloyd, 2017).

3.4 The state labour process and the class position of school leaders: the special nature of managerial work in public schools

Principals in the public education system occupy a complex position in the changing world of education. They appear to be managers in the traditional sense: at the helm of their schools, leading dozens, sometimes hundreds of staff, and they are held accountable and responsible for all that occurs at the local site. However, due to the place of each public school in the centralised state system, and the bureaucratic control that dictates a great deal of what occurs within a school, principals do not have the same scope of control as managers within a firm, or elsewhere in the capitalist system.

While the historical argument has been that public education work indirectly serves capital and therefore can be considered to include a labour process, this thesis calls for an updated understanding of the explicit relationship that has formed between public education and capital because of neoliberal influences on public sector work. As discussed in the previous chapter, new public management models have seen the introduction of so called private-sector 'efficiencies' to state services, leading to the blurring of public and private sector boundaries through outsourcing and other partnerships. While the justifications for such changes have commonly been presented by governments as being in the name of modernising bureaucracy and empowerment at the local level, their only consistent outcome has been cost cutting (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). The state may not possess a direct profit motive in the same manner as private companies, but it holds control over how the tax base is distributed throughout the public sector. Its discretion in this area ultimately serves political interests, and as an agent of capital, these interests —particularly in neoliberal times— have included the deliberate erosion of a once well-funded public sector. The state is also capable of establishing pipelines for public money to steadily enter the private sector when it chooses not to provide essential services. This already occurs in the NSW public education system through the procurement of privately developed school administration software (Dabaja, 2019). Thus, even in the absence of a direct profit motive, the fundamental task for managers in the public education system does not differ from those in the private sector, as at the most basic level, control remains central to extracting the most labour possible from workers in an increasingly under-resourced system.

A further control imperative is derived from the way education lies at the centre of the dichotomous roles of the state: to both act in the interests of capital and support democracy (Ball, 1994). As hegemonic interest groups seek to maintain dominance within government, counter-hegemonic interests seek to destabilise the current order (Gramsci, 1971). This tension exists within and pursues control over education, and sometimes progressive views are successful in gaining foothold — negotiating some representation within the overall ‘settlement’ (Apple, 2001). No matter their position, teachers cannot be relied upon to implement any such settlement in its totality due to their own social, political and ideological beliefs, and the degree to which they seek to adapt their work to what they interpret the needs of their students to be. Strategies of control are therefore inevitably present within the work of public education, as the state holds an imperative to oversee the realisation of their settlement in schools (Reid, 2003).

Hoggett (1994) has argued that rather than deploying bureaucratic control over school leaders, that is, indirect control through governmental policies and hierarchies, the strategy of the state labour process has been to convert them into managers — an understanding of control over public managerial work only revealed by examining its development in education. Rather than proletarianising all teachers to maintain control over this skilled labour, labour process analysis revealed that career advancement could be utilised to prevent teachers from uniformly possessing control over the conception and execution of their work.

Further to this, management, in the chalk-facing work of NSW public education, is never only management ‘of something’ — nor can it be characterised as merely a struggle for power in the capitalist hierarchy. While public education has opened itself up to private sector influences, and has been continuously pushed into doing more with less of the public resources on which it depends, it still remains driven by a social purpose. The NSW Department of Education itself cites equity as a central focus, and refers to its “moral purpose” as “the enabler of equality and opportunity for all young people” (DOE,

2021a, p.1) — an articulation of its singular role in the provision of a service that remains, at least in part, motivated by a mission outside of markets and profit. Principals, and by extension, all members of a public school's leadership hierarchy must typically perform non-managerial work that pertains to student welfare, such as behavioural plans and risk assessments: planning necessary to accommodate the social or security needs of particular students. Their responsibilities extend beyond the management of teachers, or the administration of the school itself — a duty of care to all students necessitates wide ranging labour. While this may not render the labour process of school leaders as equivalent to that of the general teaching staff, it demonstrates clearly that school leaders' work aligns more closely to teachers than it does to bureaucratic or political leadership within the state. A contradiction therefore exists in the managerial structure of public education, which manifests, as the following chapters will discuss, as tensions in the role and work of school leaders.

Despite being definitionally structured around managerial responsibilities, the work of school leaders, at every level, still includes the teaching labour process. Deputy principals are still often required to engage in the frontline work of teaching, and head teachers usually take on a teaching load similar or equivalent to that of general teaching staff. When considered alongside their 'middle manager' responsibilities, these dual aspects of their role are inextricable from one another. In this instance, they perform the same work as those they manage, assuming a vital place within their own team rather than merely overseeing its function. Further, principals still take on teaching loads subject to local resourcing requirements. As will be touched upon in the findings of this thesis, the state-wide teacher shortage at the time this study was conducted necessitated the widespread return of principals not only to the classroom, but even to the playground to fulfil responsibilities as basic as supervision. In the labour process of teaching itself, school leaders in NSW possess no more control over the curriculum — what is actually taught, or the core product of their labour— than any other teacher. There exists a historical movement within education work calling for greater control over the curriculum by teachers themselves, particularly as a means of legitimising the profession and preventing deskilling (Ozga and Lawn, 1988). Notwithstanding the contemporary reality that Australian educators still lament their lack of control over

what is taught in schools (Dinham et al., 2018; McGrath-Champ et al., 2018), it might thus be asked whether the persistence of this appeal can be likened to the manager's struggle for power in the capitalist economy.

Ultimately, however, the performance of public school leaders is not measured in profit, and does not secure them any immediate financial benefit. The overall academic performance of a school might attract more enrolments, which, under the NSW Department of Education's Resource Allocation Model, will result in greater funding — but this funding is proportionate to the needs of these additional enrolments (NSW DOE, 2021c). A school might achieve excellence despite cost-cutting or less than adequate resources, but the benefactor of this lean operation is the state, and not the teaching staff — executive or otherwise. With the advent of the MySchools ranking system and its state-wide publication of school results, improved educational outcomes may mean that schools have benefited from reputational improvement. Enrolment at a school may become preferred over other schools in the local area, and competition for enrolments may have long term benefits for the culture and working environment at the school. External forces, such as the gentrification of the catchment area for enrolments at a school, leading to an improvement in the socio-economic status of the families in a school community, may also mean that the community becomes better positioned to voluntarily fundraise for the school, or for parents to donate their time to support school initiatives (Dabaja, 2019). However, school leaders, be they principals, deputy principals or head teachers, are in no way financially rewarded for increased efficiency in their school, lean operation within their school, or improved educational outcomes in their school — they do not individually benefit from 'business-like' successes within the school. This stands in contrast to managers in the private sector, who embody the classic definition of such a role — those whose interests are positively tied to the amount of surplus labour appropriated by capital, and for whom, in the event of such 'success', there always exists scope to receive a larger share of profit. Where traditional managers are incentivised by this possibility to tighten their control over the labour process of those whom they supervise, there exists no such equivalent at any level of public school leadership — a further testament to their collective class position as something other than simply 'managers'.

The executive structure of public schools in NSW, from their ‘middle managing’ head teachers to the senior leadership of their principals, may resemble the managerial hierarchy of an organisation shaped by and competing in a capitalist system. Further, these schools sit within a public bureaucracy that is increasingly interacting with the private sector (Lingard et al., 2017) and administered by the state government, thus subject to and at least, to some degree shaped by, the prevailing ideologies of the political cycle. Considering their place within the political economy of the state and the absence of a direct profit motive for school staff themselves, work in schools — including managerial work — can all be considered work examinable by labour process theory.

The labour process of school leaders employed by the state also displays close similarities with that of middle managers in both public and private sector work. This comparison offers additional theoretical tools with horizontal relevance to the analysis of this thesis and the labour process literature. Situated above ‘first-level supervision’, but below senior management, the place of deputy principals within a school more obviously mirrors the responsibility of middle managers over the most frontline of workers as well as their accountability to senior leadership within the organisation (Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Mintzberg, 1989). Further, just as middle managers aid and execute the strategies of senior management (Harding, Lee and Ford, 2014), deputy principals are considered to be part of a school’s executive, and their role sees them supporting the principal, specific programs within the school at the principals’ delegation, *and* the educational faculty that they may belong to alongside a “direct impact on teaching and learning” and “influence on student outcomes” (NSW DOE, 2021b, p.1). Notably, their responsibilities are acknowledged to differ both within and between schools on account of the particular needs of their “local context” (NSW DOE, 2021b, p.1).

Deputy principals are also described by the NSW Department of Education as “middle leaders”, invoking an equivalency to the middle managers of traditional organisational

hierarchies (NSW DOE, 2021b, p.1). By the Department's definition, this sub-category of leadership also encompasses head teachers, who oversee the teaching staff that comprise each subject faculty in a school — within a science faculty, there will be a head teacher of science, and for the mathematics faculty, a head teacher of mathematics and so on. While this study focuses on principals and deputy principals as school leaders, it includes an interview with one head teacher, which will later be discussed for its parallels to deputy principalship. Both roles commonly face tensions arising from their managerial responsibilities, particularly because they remain embedded in the general teaching force. The Department acknowledges this tension in the role of middle leaders, distilling their importance as the leaders within a school who have a “direct impact on classroom teaching, and therefore student achievement” (NSW DOE, 2021b, p.1).

Despite the lean-management driven flattening of the leadership structures popular in private sector organisations worldwide, and the counterpart cost-cutting that has accompanied new public management, middle managers often remain — a testament to their importance to the labour process (Harding, Lee and Ford, 2014). Case study comparisons of middle management labour processes in the UK after restructuring in large private sector organisations and new public management reforms in a public sector organisation suggest that work intensification for middle managers can be found in both sectors; moreover, it has been both normalised and institutionalised as an expected reality (McCann, Morris and Hassard, 2008). With respect to the Bravermanian predictions of traditional labour process theory, this work intensification has not been accompanied by deskilling — rather, middle managers possess both increased responsibility and skills. Despite this, opportunities for upward career mobility have decreased, and the nature of this work drives out employees unwilling or unable to sustain the hours it demands (McCann, Morris and Hassard, 2008). Compounding this intensification in the public sector has been a lack of commensurate financial reward (McCann, Morris and Hassard, 2008). McCann, Morris and Hassard link these outcomes of middle managers' labour process to the “uncompromising” financial pressures of global capitalism (2008, p.367) — pressures to which public sector work is being increasingly exposed. The dual trajectories of a less-resourced state bureaucracy and evidence of significant commercial activity in the NSW public education system

(Lingard et al., 2017) suggest at least adjacent exposure to the same forces. Evidence of parallel processes, including simultaneous reductions in job quality and persistent, long term cost cutting in public education work feature strongly in the findings-focused chapters of this thesis.

Labour process theory facilitates the examination of both managerial work itself *and* the management of this work— the precarious and often contradictory labour process of the ‘squeezed middle’ (McCann, Morris and Hassard, 2008). The question of how to classify executive roles within schools according to labour process theory is complex. Armstrong (1989) famously argued against the Bravermanian view of managerial work as being a labour process in and of itself. Recalling the original basis of Braverman’s argument, that capital’s efforts to monopolise conceptual work is itself a key mechanism through which labour is subjugated, Armstrong (1989) argues that considering the work of managers as a labour process is a contradiction. Rather, he stipulates that the relationship between those who occupy middle management roles, which would include principals, deputy principals and head teachers as in the case of this thesis, is one of *agency* — constituted by trust or substitutes for trust in the form of control mechanisms and performance monitoring or surveillance (Armstrong, 1989). Further, he characterises the division of managerial labour as an inevitable necessity in the struggle between capital and labour. Given that the subordination of physical labour through the control of mental labour is not necessary to secure the material conditions of existence, such control over labour is only required by capitalism itself and is therefore not a labour process (Armstrong, 1989).

This debate evolved as evidence emerged indicating that middle managers have undergone their own processes of proletarianisation. In comparison to senior management, middle managers may experience less security in their roles, as well as greater stress and greater prospects of a decline in pay subject to changing conditions (Scarborough and Burrell, 1996). This indicates that managers, and managerial work itself, are varied and stratified: not all managers’ interests are so materially bound to profit that they personify capital (Braverman, 1974 in Willmott, 1997). Willmott

maintains that not all work can be considered a labour process, and that managerial work is not simply a labour process on account of it being work (1997). However, he strongly refutes that managerial work is not a labour process, and called for labour process theory to advance beyond the fundamental idea that managerial work is only ever a function of capital (Willmott, 1997). Constituting this idea is the reality that managers do not exclusively engage in unproductive labour as do those of the purely capitalist class; they also engage in productive labour, and that their work is imbued with their own individual cultural and ideological interests, as well as interests beyond that of the 'firm' alone — such as that of their families and career aspirations (Willmott, 1997). Most significantly, Willmott emphasises that within the structure of capitalist organisations, managers can occupy contradictory positions: they are not simply “compliant functionaries who unproblematically perform the task of securing and obscuring surplus value” (1997, p.1339).

By virtue of this argument, the work of all staff in a public school should be considered a labour process, but despite its similarity to private sector work, *it is not private sector work*. A more specific understanding of the labour process in public sector work is required to understand the effects of imposing structures of control over this work. Due to the neoliberal imposition of market structures on socially motivated work, this labour is carried out in a manner analogous to private sector organisations in a bureaucratic structure developed in and by capitalism. The profit motive in this work is indirect and obscured, and thus, public workers are further abstracted from the forces shaping their labour than those in managerial roles in the private sector.

Looking to the literature to consider the characteristics of middle managers' labour process that might offer insights into the labour process of school leaders, evidence suggests that middle managers are both “controlled and controllers”; and that they both “resist” and are “resisters” (Harding, Lee and Ford, 2014, p.1). The aforementioned work intensification and the increasing responsibilities assigned to middle managers that survive de-layering in organisations (Hassard, Morris and McCann, 2009; Hassard, Morris and McCann 2010, Hassard, Morris and McCann 2012) is paralleled by

contradictory management literature about what they *should* do (Harding, Lee and Ford, 2014) — doubly illustrating the pressures on a role popularly referred to as being ‘squeezed’. Harding, Lee and Ford (2014) argue that in controlling junior staff, while resisting senior management, middle managers constitute the organisational hierarchy itself.

This thesis considers the centrality of this tension in the work of school leaders while also retaining focus on the possibility that school leaders’ interests do not necessarily merge with those of the state. As even private sector middle managers have engaged in resistance towards upper management, so-called managers in public education, who do not stand to benefit from the extraction of surplus value, are arguably less likely to share a common motive with their managers as they do not share in any profits.

3.5 Control mechanisms and the labour process

Normative, rational, and chiasmatic control are three theories of control, central to labour process analysis, that support the capacity of this thesis to articulate and extend an understanding of control and resistance in the labour process of school leaders. ‘Normative control’ is explained by Kunda (2006, p.11) as involving the “claiming” of an employee’s self in the “corporate interest”. A mechanism delivered through the culture of an organisation, it aims to motivate workers to act willingly in the interests of their employer (Kunda, 2006). Under normative control, rather than being tethered to an organisation by purely transactional or economic incentives, workers experience “internal commitment, strong identification with company goals, and satisfaction from work” (Kunda, 2006, p.11). If workers internalise the aims and values of their organisation through immersion in its culture, and their personal and professional interests merge, then the need for more overt, external means of control is reduced.

Despite this, under a system of normative control, there is an inevitable tension between the “internal and external control of the self” (Kunda, 2006, p.215). In having to reconcile normative expectations with which they are incompatible, workers experience “sociological ambivalence” (Merton, 1957 in Kunda, 2006, p.215). Under these conditions, it is possible to feel both attachment and detachment towards different aspects of work. This negotiation between the internal and external becomes “difficult to sustain” as it involves continuous construction and performance on the part of the worker (Kunda, 2006, p.16). Recent evidence of such incompatibility in the NSW Education System exists, with 88% of teachers in NSW reporting that their work imposes contradictory requirements (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018, p.32). This is supplemented by cultural accounts of exhaustion in the profession (Stroud, 2018), indicating an even more fundamental tension around teachers’ capacity to meet even the volume of labour expected of them.

In contrast to normative control is rational control, which involves the clear communication of well-defined objectives, sufficient provision of training, and ‘reasonable’ incentives for workers (Barley and Kunda, 1992). Rational control sees the interests of management elicited by ensuring that workers clearly understand their purpose within an organisation. Normative and rational control are theoretically dichotomous, in that, for example, managerial rhetoric is said to be shaped by either normative or rational ideologies. However, given the theories about hybrid or combination regimes of control that will be discussed in the following paragraphs, it is possible that both might be present in the educational work setting. The recent redefinition of the deputy principal and head teacher executive leadership role descriptions as ‘middle leaders’ by the Department of Education (NSW DOE, 2021), as discussed in this chapter, provides an empirical basis for questioning whether Departmental policy shapes control strategies enough that they limit the variability of leadership approaches within and between schools.

Control over the labour process is understood, in some circumstances, to be ‘partial and negotiated’, and further to this, mechanisms of control in any given work setting can be

diverse, or combined in such a way that they produce complex and unique outcomes (Sturdy, Fleming and Delbridge, 2010, p.114). According to Reed (2010), combinations of control mechanisms such as these demonstrate a 'new control logic' that sees the implementation of 'electronic surveillance, cultural engineering and political management' in conjunction with one another. Sewell (1998) considers these hybrid combinations to be theoretically distinct from traditional (or individually implemented) regimes of control. The existing acknowledgement of this in the labour process literature means that post-structuralist theories of discursive reality are not necessary to account for subjective mechanisms of control. Multiple modes of control, both material and subjective, can be accounted for in the same work setting even when drawing upon mainstream labour process theory.

Sewell's concept of 'Chimerical Control' (1998) arose out of examining the function of surveillance in organisational teams. Referring to a "hybrid mode" of workplace control, it consists of both vertical forms of surveillance, that is, those enacted by management systems, and horizontal forms of surveillance, namely, the surveillance of "peer group scrutiny" (Sewell, 1998, p.1). This mechanism of control is most effective for workers assembled in teams, and this team structure is also what sustains it. Schools, as organisations, are made up of teams — in a sense, they are also one large team. School leaders, or the executive leadership of a school, are a team amongst themselves, as well as often belonging to the subject faculties in which they are trained. Chimerical control incorporates both subjective and material means of control, acknowledging the capacity for multiple modes of control mechanisms to function alongside one another.

Theoretically, chimerical control straddles the fault line between 'traditional' labour process theory and the post-structuralist ideas of control over the labour process, which embrace the control of the subjective, rather than the strictly material. It must be noted that this kind of hybrid control can only really exist in work settings that are "socialised, interdependent [and] synchronized" (Sewell, 1998, p.1). The work of teaching, as well as school leadership, holds these characteristics: teachers have regular opportunities to interact and can also be tasked with collaboration, as well as carrying out interdependent functions that together comprise the entire education of a student. Sewell's research also highlights the intersection between surveillance and control

mechanisms, with bureaucracy being replaced by surveillance as the dominant mode of “rationalization and control” and the uptake of teams instead of more individualised, ‘Taylorist’ forms of work organisation (Sewell, 1998, p.1). This thesis possesses the scope to investigate school leaders in working relationships with each other. Thus, openness to identifying what and how control mechanisms work when presiding over two or more workers who fulfil a function within an organisation together is necessary.

Thompson (2015) has commented generally on the trajectory of control structures under capitalism, pointing out that interorganisational relations and contemporary supply chains must now include disparate modes of control that labour process theory is perhaps not yet able to capture completely. Considering chimerical control, and other forms of subjective, or distant control, as well as the comments of Thompson, the possibility exists that new forms of control may have emerged in the case of NSW public education work. This thesis builds upon general labour process theory through the extension of its theoretical framework when identifying the specific control mechanisms in the work of school leaders.

3.6 Resistance and the labour process

Braverman’s original theorisation of the labour process overlooked the possibility of resistance to control, depicting workers singularly as passive subjects exploited by capital (1978). Prior to this, Marx had established that worker resistance is an expected response to capital domination, and that the tension between workers’ efforts to reclaim power and capital’s efforts to overcome them are an inherent feature of the capitalist relations of production (Marx, 1867). Labour process theory came to enfold concepts of resistance, which is understood to arise as a response to control by workers whose “experience and self-understanding is denied or undermined by the demands being placed upon them” (Knights and Willmott, 2016, p.361; Friedman, 1984). The presence of resistance and the forms it takes are therefore not merely a response to

unsatisfactory, material conditions of work, but existential: bound up in workers' identities and beliefs about the purpose of their labour.

This thesis adopts Ackroyd and Thompson's definition of resistance within labour process theory, encompassing anything that workers do in the workplace that they should not — by the definition of management — be doing (2022). Of relevance to public education have been studies of altruistic professions, such as social work, that have extended theoretical ideas of resistance to include engaging in unpaid labour, specifically in order to provide the best quality of service possible to their clients (Baines, 2023; Daly and Armstrong, 2016). The care sector in particular, a workforce feminised to a similarly large extent as education, has presented examples of workers resisting managerialisation and under-resourcing by working even harder (Baines, Brown and Cabahug, 2024).

In education work research, the prioritisation of changes to the labour process that resembled scientific management often neglected to address forms of resistance amongst teachers (Reid, 2003). Nevertheless, school leaders and teachers demonstrated complex responses to the changing conditions of work in schools, curriculum reform, governance restructuring and the reconfiguration of funding models at the outset of the global education reform movement (Grace, 1996). Inherent to these changes were attempts to control the work of education in new ways (Reid, 2003). Teachers processed these changes through their own existing professional and ideological lenses, leading to a spectrum of context-specific adaptations in their work that ranged from accommodation to explicit rejection and resistance (Broadfoot et al., 1988; Troman 1996; Woods, 1995).

Evidence of resistance, as will be shown, has only continued to emerge as new public management doctrines have bolstered contemporary iterations in global education reform, increasingly standardising curriculums, heightening performance and accountability mechanisms and importing corporate management practices (Fuller and

Stevenson, 2019; McKay, Thomson and Blackmore, 2024). In the UK, school leaders have been found to challenge reforms in both covert ways, such as refusing to adopt corporate language in the enactment of change within their schools, and overt ways, such as refusing to implement policy, subverting policy, 'cherry-picking' policy according to what will most likely be enforced, and openly criticising initiatives during Departmental level meetings (Fuller, 2019). In the USA, some schools have cooperated to boycott the administration of standardised tests (Horn, 2014).

Within the Australian context, in the NSW public education system under the LSLD reform, secondary school principals demonstrated various forms of resistance to the managerialisation of their work (Dabaja, 2019). These included the "creative interpretation of policy", where policy was deliberately implemented in a way that deviated from Departmental expectation; the refusal to adopt corporate language when speaking to their staff and developing internal policies; overriding centralised staffing procedures in order to offer temporary staff permanent positions; neglecting to seek permission before proceeding with on-site maintenance; and mobilising the support of the school community to oppose policy (Dabaja, 2019, p.85).

Some individual school leaders have been capable of prioritising a holistic view of education despite a performative climate that emphasises a narrowed curriculum and quantitative benchmarks (McKay, 2018). It has been possible to shift focus away from standardised test results to centre individual student growth; yet, this kind of resistance can be heavily reliant upon the sensitive relationship between a school leader and their education department, as well as a proven track record of satisfactory school performance (McKay, 2018). In such cases, the capacity to resist has been paradoxically conceptualised as the 'freedom' or 'space' to resist (McKay, 2018, Colman, 2021). Long term relational work, reputation building and the consistent achievement of targets are often required for school leaders to negotiate the possibility of resistance before they can engage in resistance itself.

The absence of clear resistance, or even the limited nature of resistance by school leaders must also be critically interpreted alongside the restrictive conditions of their roles. Both labour process analyses and wider studies of education work have recorded perceptions of school leaders as unwilling to resist (Fitzgerald et al., 2019), but a lack of evidence of resistance does not necessarily amount to unwillingness to resist. This assumption risks mistakenly concluding that school leaders are either passive victims of control—falling prey to the original limitations of labour process theory— or that their interests have merged with those of capital and the state. Without empirical confirmation, this is an incomplete picture. This thesis will go on to present robust evidence of many forms of resistance by school leaders.

Much research also positions resistance amongst teachers as diametrically opposed to school leadership, as if school leaders would naturally seek to eliminate it, rather than considering the possibility that teachers and school leaders might be resisting the same phenomena (Anderson and Cohen, 2015). Demanding workloads have been identified as a constraint upon school leaders' capacity to resist, as negotiating the dynamic challenges that emerge in the daily work of school management can force school leaders into a reactive state (McKay, 2018; Dabaja, 2019). The hyper-enactment of policy in some education systems, where compliance within schools is actively privileged and closely enforced, can also eliminate practical space for resistance (Colman, 2021). New school leaders, lacking experience in the role, are also less likely to possess knowledge of alternative models of leadership and system administration and feel greater pressure to demonstrate their competence in the position (Dabaja, 2019). It is therefore vital to account for the powerful factors working to prevent school leaders from resisting in a neoliberal context as well as understanding the forms resistance does take.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has established the theoretical suitability and explanatory power of labour process theory to support an investigation of school leaders' work in the NSW public education system. In reviewing the contribution of labour process theory to studies of work in education, it explains the importance of inserting a local analysis of the labour process in the NSW public education system into the broader global political and economic landscape, especially the centrality of education to the role of the state under capitalism.

It has clarified three theoretical gaps in labour process analyses of work in education that this thesis seeks to address. First, through its focus on school leaders, it seeks to further demonstrate their class position outside that of the managerial class, attesting to the legitimacy of their work being regarded as a labour process. Second, it seeks to identify the ways in which control mechanisms have persisted and evolved in the labour process of school leaders. Third, acknowledging the capacity for educators to be more than "passive bearers of structure", it seeks to capture the ways in which school leaders resist the forms of control in their labour process (Reid, 2003).

Together with the theorisation of new public management reform and its manifestation as changes to public education, labour process theory allows us to better understand school leaders' work in a neoliberal policy setting. Having established the theoretical framework for answering the research questions of this thesis, the following chapter will explain its methodology and methods before beginning to present its findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explains both the methodological approach and methods adopted by this thesis. Explicitly acknowledging the neoliberal foundations of new public management reform and its subsequent iterations, the suitability of a 'small *n*' case study approach, centred around the aim of heuristic generalisability, is established. Following from this, it presents the case for combining new public management concepts with labour process theory to create an original theoretical framework capable of linking the local realities of school leaders' work to broader socio-economic trends and structures. The multi-method data collection strategy of the study is detailed, including a policy and context analysis as well as semi-structured, qualitative interviews. Challenges faced and strategies employed to mitigate the limitations of these methods are explained. Finally, the process of data analysis is described, centring on the considered adoption of live coding to allow for the maximal emergence of findings, both expected and unexpected.

4.2 Research Questions

As outlined in Chapter 1, this thesis investigates the impact of new public management style reform on the labour process of school leaders in the NSW public education system. It does so through seeking to answer three research questions, composed to build a comprehensive understanding of the changes to school leaders' work:

Research Question #1: What challenges are most evident in school leaders' work during the School Success Model policy period?

In order to first establish a detailed foundation for analysing school leaders' work, Research Question #1, answered in Chapter 6, captures the empirical working landscape of study participants at the time of interview, between 2021 and 2023. Seeking to emulate the tradition of ethnography in the labour process literature within the limitations of a PhD (Knights and Willmott, 2016), it develops a deeply textured picture of school leaders' everyday tasks. School leaders' work is highly complex and varied, and understanding of their labour process, as well as the interactions of policy with their work, requires a rich level of context.

Research Question #2: What are the mechanisms by which control is exercised over the work of school leaders under the School Success Model?

With matters of control at the heart of reform to school leaders' work —both the degree to which they can exercise control as leaders and the ways in which they are controlled themselves— Research Question #2, answered across Chapters 7 and 8, captures the changes to school leaders' labour process after new public management style policy reform. Through its focus on school leaders, it addresses a significant gap in the education work literature, which predominantly focuses on the impacts of such reforms to teachers' work.

Research Question #3: How and why do school leaders resist control mechanisms in their labour process?

Answered in Chapter 9, Research Question #3 investigates school leaders' capacity to resist the ways in which they are controlled, addressing an additional gap in the education work literature that has often portrayed principals in neoliberal reform settings as simply or obviously management-aligned.

4.3 Qualitative research methodology

A qualitative research methodology, including a multi-method approach, was essential for the execution of this study. As mentioned, a rich understanding of every research participant's work context was necessary given the task of studying a profession that encompasses such varied environments and responsibilities. The characteristics of schools are vastly different and often combine uniquely, creating challenges that are specific to each school and its community (Smyth, 1995). To gain meaningful insight into the working realities of educators after this reform, consideration for this high degree of variability in school contexts had to be accommodated. Therefore, it would not have been possible to apply the same sets of questions to all the participants. Lines of questioning were adjusted as I learnt about the working context of each participant to ascertain the particular impacts of the reform on their work. A qualitative methodology allowed space for this flexibility, specifically through semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2008).

Furthermore, according to Edmondson and McManus (2007), the less that is known about a research phenomenon being studied, the greater the need for open ended questioning. A qualitative approach allowed me to continue to learn about the new and emerging phenomena being studied — in particular, the School Success Model in its first year of implementation — while retaining the ability to adjust methods when the need arose. A qualitative methodology supported these needs in its compatibility with open ended questioning and the elevation of participants as authorities over their own narratives (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

4.4 The 'small *n*' case study approach

This is a 'small *n*' case study. It does not aim to present findings that will be generalisable to every case of reform to school leaders' work. Instead, it seeks to explain

how and why the impacts on school leaders' work captured in this thesis a result of policy reform specific to its sample: the NSW public education system.

Much contemporary research, particularly within the positivist tradition, remains defined by a Newtonian mode of thinking: a decontextualised ideal that frames science as the pursuit of universal, general and timeless knowledge (Toulmin, 1990; Tsoukas, 2009). Stemming from this, the concept of generalisation in research was once singular in meaning. It referred to the statistical, positivist standard of whether the sample involved in a study accurately mirrored the population it represented. More nuanced definitions of generalisation have now become accepted, but still, even in the social sciences, the capability of research findings to be generalisable to context is viewed with a kind of academic superiority. Instead, this research argues for the importance of investigating the "particular, the local and the timely" (Tsoukas, 2009, p.287).

Honouring the value of a particular case means aiming beyond the identification of what is common between every empirical example of a concept. Tsoukas (2009) invokes Wittgenstein's (1958) notion of 'language games' (1958) to argue that what constitutes a language, as an example of a research phenomenon, is best understood by the relationships between different languages, rather than common properties that they all share. Further clarifying the conditions of relating such concepts to one another, Wittgenstein offers the metaphor of a rope, joined together not by a single thread that runs through it all, but overlapping fibres that connect to and reinforce each other (Wittgenstein, 1958). These relationships can also be understood as 'family resemblances' between phenomena (Wittgenstein, 1958, p.67).

This thesis accepts the invitation of both Tsoukas and Wittgenstein to recognise that approaches to research founded on the "craving for generality" lead us to assume automatically that concepts always possess rigid characteristics, and that the particular is always a mere manifestation of the general (Tsoukas 2009, p.287). These assumptions operationalise theory as a means to ascertain the 'real truth' of empirical

phenomena, as if it can be repeatedly calculated and precisely understood. Rather, Wittgenstein's 'language games' encourage us to preserve the "epistemic significance of the particular without losing sight of the general", and make the case for investigating likeness and specificity (Tsoukas, 2009, p.288). This is referred to as the notion of heuristic generalisability, and generalising to theory, rather than context — an aim of this research. With this goal in mind, rather than only using terms already defined in the literature and using context to confirm their correctness, a heuristically generalisable study can remain theoretically open ended, opening itself up to the possibility of refining and better developing theoretical tools.

As explained by Tsoukas (2009), the function of heuristic generalisability can be to refine what we know — using insights from a small n study to build theories that advance the tools available for understanding research phenomena, rather than continuing to explain cases with the limitations of theory as it already exists. This study values the specificity of the case it has been able to investigate: that of the NSW public education system at a particular moment of neoliberal transformation. It is not 'exactly' like any other case in the world, and understanding it constitutes the theoretical and empirical contribution of this thesis. Indeed, as explained in the following section, the neoliberal policy setting of this study warrants openness to heuristic generalisability.

4.5 The suitability of the 'small n ' case study to the investigation of neoliberal policy reform

Relevant to the methodological design of this thesis is the nature of neoliberalism, the prevailing ideology and set of practices driving capitalism — the system of economic organisation that, even in the public sector forms the social, political and economic context of this research. Neoliberalism is an ongoing project, constantly remaking itself in the pursuit of enabling capital accumulation (as discussed in Chapter 2), freeing capital itself to transcend constraints through marketisation, privatisation and deregulation — but also re-regulation (Cahill and Konings, 2017). Rather than a unified

doctrine or empirical similarities that can be easily identified, Mirowski argues that what holds neoliberals together is a set of epistemic commitments, and a united belief in the “role of knowledge in human affairs” (2009, p.418). This understanding of neoliberalism as a concept immediately echoes the call of Wittgenstein (1958) and Tsoukas (2009) to see that a social concept does not necessarily have rigid boundaries, and that phenomena can be related or classified together, without following a strict set of rules for such classification each time. Studies of neoliberalism and its consequences in social, political and economic arenas —as is this thesis— are not well suited to mere empirical generalisation. In the tradition of Wittgenstein (1958), the continuously evolving economic doctrine of neoliberalism in the tradition of Wittgenstein (1958) may reasonably be said to resemble a *rope*.

Studies of the evolution and impacts of neoliberalism must be geared to detect both deceptiveness and a form of ‘relatedness’ that is anything but rigid. It has been described as “shapeshifting”, given the discrepancy between what neoliberalism claims to be in written ideological doctrines and the uneven, “actually existing” ways in which it has been enacted (Peck, Brenner and Theodore, 2018). Duplicity as an acceptable means to an end has been a core feature of neoliberalism since its inception amongst ideologues who supported the use of populist, single-issue campaigns on social issues as a means to secure the political power to legislate economic reform (Mirowski, 2009). Stemming from the confusion amongst even those who claim to be neoliberals themselves about how to define the ideology, neoliberalism has also been misrepresented in public and academic discourse. Notable examples include the overly simplistic notion that “[neoliberalism means] you are free to do anything as long as it involves shopping” (Zizek in Mirowski, 2009, p.421) and the conflation of neoliberalism with neoclassical economics by the eminent David Harvey (2005). Such misunderstandings form part of the fabric of these inquiries.

Returning to the methodological focus of the “particular, the local and the timely”, it is important to highlight that in many cases, research into the consequences of new public management reform has been ignored by policymakers. Even in the specific case of

NSW, the detailing of the School Success Model on the Department of Education website provided a list of academic sources — a kind of reference list to rationalise the reform design (DOE, 2020). This reference list did not include any of the recent public research conducted into Australian education work, such as a major survey of over 18,000 teachers commissioned by the NSW Teachers Federation (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018), or case study interviews that revealed the detrimental impact of Local Schools, Local Decisions' focus on economic rationalism (Martin and Macpherson, 2015). When research has been ignored by the state in such an obvious way, it suggests that policymakers selectively apply it to justify policy decisions shaped by other forces. This resembles the neoliberal practice of obscuring the real reasons driving policy change. Even if this research cannot shape future policy decisions, its value still stands as a record of the realities of school leaders' work. In the absence of anything else, a participant-driven record of work from the perspective of workers is critical, particularly given that deception is an established modus operandi of neoliberal reform. Thick, rich description has thus been used wherever possible in this research to account for the possibility that this investigation may be useful in the future in ways that cannot be anticipated today.

4.6 Theoretical framework: combining new public management concepts with labour process theory

The theoretical foundation for new public management is a combination of institutional economic theory and management theory. Any analysis of new public management and its impacts encompasses these theories by default — it is embedded in the rationales provided by governments when choosing to implement new public management style reforms. This reveals the origins of new public management concepts in theories of control, and studies of private industry — not merely public work. New public management reforms have been noted to work well in some situations, but *not* in others. Their success is highly context dependent, and often the justification for their implementation draws upon rare cases where they have worked well — an exception, rather than the rule— dependent on specific, favourable circumstances (Christensen

and Læg Reid, 2022). Their implementation, regardless of this, and the use of selective evidence, suggests that the motivation for their implementation must be anything other than what it claims to be. Otherwise, we expect that the state researched the risks poorly, or sincerely believed that, based on their seemingly deliberately selected and narrow evidence, the policy approach would achieve the outcomes stated.

The theoretical and empirical lens of new public management captures changes to the organisation of work in education as a public service, parallel to other state administered work in the public sector. However, when considering the analytical tools available for better understanding changes to work in schools, a critical intersection exists in the literature at the global education reform movement (GERM), which focuses on these changes from an education-oriented lens (Sahlberg, 2016). As a concentration of studies investigating changes to education, it encompasses not only the subject of work, but also pedagogy and other processes affecting teaching and learning. Sahlberg posits that global trends in education reform have been driven by ideological forces outside of education itself (2016). These are broadly categorised by reform phenomena that are reflected in the School Success Model policy setting, including the pervasiveness of standardisation, both in educational assessment, professional assessment, and the curriculum; increased conditions for competition, such as public performance rankings and league tables; an increased focus on literacy, numeracy and science, narrowing the indicators of success to exclude less measurable areas of learning, or interests that do not correspond easily to the industrial needs of capitalism; and the importation of corporate models for the management, improvement and assessment of schools (Sahlberg, 2016).

Upon close consideration, GERM appears to be a consequence of the wide-ranging manifestation of new public management ideals. It has sought to reshape more than simply the structure of work in education, surpassing administration and management to alter pedagogical practice itself (Zajda, 2010). In particular, the shift towards standardised testing as the focal point of education programs, and the corresponding quantitative metrics used to define and assess educational outcomes have necessitated

changes to the way that education must be delivered (Hargreaves et al., 2010). If education programs culminate in standardised tests —selective in what kind of outcomes they are able to capture— ultimately, the means of assessing both student and teacher performance are narrowed. This has significant ramifications for what we consider indicators of success for students, who are seeking recognition of their skills in order to access post-school opportunities in the labour market, or to undertake further education. Building upon this to consider the reality for teachers and school leaders under this reform movement, it follows that indicators of success for teachers, as well as schools themselves, are reduced to fit quantitative measures — readying them for an arena of performance appraisal and competition. Looking further to the relationship between the public education system and the state, these indicators become fertile for political use: to justify, or indeed to cut public funding. Moreover, they lend themselves to public media reporting on initiatives in education using statistics that *appear* to be quickly comprehensible; they enable simplified representations of what *appears* to be occurring in the public education system, impacting public opinion, and therefore potentially influencing the political cycle.

Recalling Wittgenstein once again, the overlapping fibres of new public management and the global education reform movement directed this investigation of work in public education to consider the context of capitalism. Sahlberg, who coined the term, understands GERM to be a function of globalisation (2016). To accept this, and consider this further, it has been argued that globalisation cannot be explicated from capitalism: it is a process that is both the result of, and in service to our dominant system of economic organisation (Harvey, 2003). The global reach of the new standards, practices and ideologies of GERM bear a clear relationship to the many far-reaching iterations of new public management and its successors. Tying the global education reform movement to economic changes is the argument that global labour markets and integrated economies have made globally shared educational standards necessary (Sahlberg, 2016). The origins of the public sector itself, and therefore new public management as simply an iterative approach to its governance, are also argued to be inseparable from capitalism and Weberian conceptions of the state (Felts and Joss, 2000). Having arisen out of the need for bureaucracies to respond to a world in which

information can be conveyed with almost instantaneous effects, new public management was developed to act in service of an evolved capitalism (Felts and Joss, 2000). Both doctrines have been likened to a disease — Sahlberg plays further upon the acronym to call it an epidemic (2016), while new public management has often been characterised as a virus (e.g. Hyndman and Lapsley, 2016). Driven by the same ideology, intersecting in doctrine, and global in their reach, the clear influence of new public management and GERM on school leaders in public education beckons us to incorporate closer consideration for the impact of our system of economic organisation on this work.

In establishing the focus of this thesis, the point was made earlier that schools are not only sites of education, they are sites of work. While the wider new public management literature provides the theoretical tools to understand reform to public sector work, and GERM offers an education-oriented lens, it is labour process theory that provides a theoretical framework to incorporate a fundamental understanding of neoliberal reform as a function of capitalism. Grounded in a critical Marxist understanding of capitalism and problematising control, labour process theory can expand the theoretical lens of this research in support of its central aim: to investigate the impacts of the introduction of private sector like practices to the work of public education. Developed to offer updated theoretical tools for analysing work within the capitalist system, the domain of the private industry is where one would expect the most marked evolution of command-and-control mechanisms. Labour process theory, however, always considers public sector work to be an extension of private industry. Administered by the state, Braverman (1974) argued that government services attend to the interests of capital in multiple ways, and that the structure of public organisations can mimic those of the corporation. Labour process theory remains relevant, indeed essential, not only for the understanding it affords us of the trajectory of work organisation in the capitalist industry, but for its problematisation of the control imperative of all employers: both public and private. Labour process theory encourages us to ask how workers are being controlled, and to what end. Even briefly, Braverman's original analysis offered that public sector work, including education, is subject to its own particular needs to renew

the mechanisms through which labour is maximally extracted in service of capitalism (1974).

In studying new public management reforms, the economics and management literature have outlined the doctrine itself, itemised its different tools, and allowed for the examination of their effects: both intended and otherwise. Labour process theory allows us to situate the new public management doctrine and its tools in the broader system of capitalism, where we can build upon an investigation of the effects of new public management tools at the local site of work, asking how it shapes and is shaped by the overarching system of social and economic organisation.

Combining new public management with labour process theory also allows for the use of a theoretical framework that can extend questioning beyond its immediately obvious end. For example: what is the benefit to the state of cost cutting in public education? Labour process theory directs us to consider it as merely another way of extracting profit and enabling accumulation. If the state can successfully spend less money on public education, this might then enable either lower tax rates for the wealthy, or more money available for reallocation to supporting private schools, or indeed any other aspect of the economy. New public management concepts, such as devolution and quantitative performance management link back to the body of literature examining their recent growth in the public sector, and allow this study to describe and examine processes at the local and system level. These concepts, however, are also clearly mechanisms of control: they fall easily under the theoretical remit of labour process theory, and lead us to reframe the state not merely as an employer, but as an agent of capital. Labour process theory builds upon, and encompasses all of this analysis in order to take these findings further. It enables us to question why these processes are occurring, and ask what their broader significance is in a contemporary neoliberal context.

4.7.0 Conducting the research: methods, challenges and strategies

4.7.1 Policy analysis — Method and purpose

A policy and context analysis of the NSW Public Education system formed the empirical foundation upon which the research questions driving this study could be answered. This involved the collection and analysis of policy documents, media releases and articles and other relevant documentary evidence in order to understand the reforms themselves, and the socio-political and economic landscape in which these reforms have occurred and are occurring. This analysis was a means to formally incorporate into the study what was already known about how both the Local Schools, Local Decisions and School Success Model reforms have impacted work in schools.

The analysis also informed the development of the interview protocol used in semi-structured interviews. In particular, it enhanced my familiarity with the complex bureaucratic system in which the research participants work. Questions regarding themes, goals and terminology evident in policies and other Department texts, such as “shared accountability”, “support for local decision making” and specified actions to drive “system improvement” were incorporated into the interview protocol in the initial stages of this analysis.

4.7.2 Policy analysis — Strategies to address limitations

Sources that provided the different perspectives of all key stakeholders on the reforms to public education in NSW were selected and analysed, including the Department of Education, the public media, teachers and principals. This allowed for the triangulation of data when piecing together a narrative around the failure of Local Schools, Local Decisions.

When conducting preliminary interviews, it was found that certain commitments made by the School Success Model reform were not practically realised in schools. In order to incorporate this vital contradiction of the policy rhetoric into the policy and context analysis, interview data was introduced to supplement the secondary sources utilised in the chapter with primary empirical evidence.

4.7.3 Interviews — Method and purpose

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture an understanding of the labour process and work experiences of school leaders, as well as the impact of the School Success Model in relation to the research questions. A total of 35 participants were interviewed, including 23 principals, 8 deputy principals, 2 directors, and a literacy lead employed within the ‘corporate’, or non-school arm of the Department of Education. One head teacher and one member of general teaching staff were also interviewed. The interviews were conducted over a period of three years, staggered from late 2020 to late 2023, the research period necessarily extended by the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research chose to focus on ‘school leaders’, including school principals, deputy principals, and head teachers. While the majority of interviews were conducted with principals, the most senior leadership position in a school, this broader scope was developed to better investigate the full breadth of experience within the executive leadership team of a school. It also enabled insight into the manager-subordinate hierarchy within a school, as well as the line of supervision between schools and the Department of Education. This allowed me to gain a rich, multi-level understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) of the impact of the reforms to the work of all forms of school leadership and the different types of working relationships within the leadership hierarchy.

The semi-structured interview method met the need for flexibility in this study, allowing space for me to open up questioning around any unpredicted phenomena that arose. This was particularly important given the opportunity to interview Departmental employees including directors and a literacy lead; a member of general teaching staff; and a head teacher — distinctly different roles. Furthermore, the majority of principal interviews differed from each other *and* other roles within schools: their roles are distinctly less similar, less predictable, and involve a greater level of responsibility—especially in relation to the enduring devolution of control to executive roles originally introduced under the LSLD reform (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018).

An interview protocol was developed prior to undertaking the interviews, informed by the policy and context analysis completed beforehand, as well as the literature review and theoretical framework developed for this thesis. The protocol began with questions about the main characteristics and challenges of each participants' school, as well as questions regarding the background and history of each participant in the public education system. It moved on to ask questions about the empirical reality of both the Local Schools, Local Decisions reform and each aspect of the School Success Model, including not only the impact on their individual work, but the way these reforms may have affected working relationships between school leaders and general school staff. These lines of questioning were modified to best capture issues important to the individual participant; it was in discussing their experience of work within their schools that the flexibility of semi-structured interviews became vital. Questions then moved on to discuss the degree of control they felt they had over their work, as well as the degree to which they felt controlled by the Department of Education. Finally, questions were asked about resistance to control, especially in pursuit of what participants viewed as the core purpose of their work. This encompassed, for example, any forms of misbehaviour, or policy or directive circumvention.

In response to the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interview protocol also included questions about how the changes to work during this time may have

affected participants. Responses to these questions varied in volume depending on the time the interview was conducted — answers to these questions obviously featured more prominently in interviews conducted during or immediately after the pandemic.

The interviews with non-school leaders, including the Directors, Literacy Lead and general member of teaching staff, required protocol modifications designed to capture the scope of their roles. These interviews in particular were conducted with a greater degree of flexibility, as limited research could have been undertaken to prepare for most of them: for example, as a deeply internal role within the Department bureaucracy, there is no publicly available information about the role of the Literacy Lead.

Interviews were conducted for a minimum of 60 minutes, but varied in length up to 180 minutes, as determined by the time participants were willing and able to offer. Of the 35 interviews, 25 were conducted in person, while 10 were conducted virtually on Zoom at the preference of participants. A total of 49 hours of interview data was recorded, and then manually transcribed with the aid of the automated software transcription platform, Trint.

4.7.4 Interviews — Participant selection and sampling strategy

A purposive, heterogeneous sampling strategy was used, designed to capture some of the diversity of working conditions in the NSW public education system (Patton, 2005), while also fitting within the feasible scope of the research given the limitations of a PhD. The sample size for this study included 35 participants from 22 different schools, and included staff in active working relationships at three of those schools. Amongst those 22 schools, a range of diverse characteristics were represented, including metropolitan, regional and rural schools; comprehensive schools; schools with academically selective and other specialist streams such as sports and performing arts; schools with support units for students with learning difficulties and behavioural issues; a school with an

Intensive English Centre; co-educational, and single-sex schools. Schools also varied in their socio-economic status. Participants were sourced through an advertisement published in the newsletter of the NSW Teachers Federation. Additional participants at schools where those interviewed were in an active working relationship were sourced through invitations forwarded by participants to their colleagues through passive snowball recruitment (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). While distinguishing details regarding the characteristics of each participant's school cannot be listed in this thesis due to their potential for compromising school leader anonymity, the date, interview duration, interview format, position and basic school category of each participant are tabulated in Appendix A: Interview Data.

Obtaining principal involvement in a study of this nature was difficult — the very literature within which this research is situated emphasises the relationship between the “sheer quantity of [their] work” and a propensity to experience psychological burnout at a rate of 1.7 times the average Australian (Riley, 2017, p.15). Drawing upon existing networks from the Honours research preceding this thesis ensured the participation of principals — vital, given their central relationship to the subject of this inquiry. Many participants expressed their willingness to be contacted about further studies, resulting in the inclusion of seven participants.

The sample size was guided first by the target of theoretical saturation, and then limited by what was reasonably possible within the timeframe of a PhD program and the availability of participants. The sample size required to reach theoretical saturation in qualitative studies is well documented to depend on many different factors particular to the study in question (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Thus, the research looked to the existing literature to affirm the appropriateness of its targeted sample size. The Honours project preceding this research, conducted into a closely related topic, achieved saturation at approximately fifteen interviews. In addition, Fitzgerald et al. (2018), McGrath-Champ et al. (2017) and Gavin and McGrath-Champ (2016) also generated significant findings with sample sizes between 19-30 participants. Saturation in this study was achieved at around 25 school leader participants, as understood by my

identification of commonly repeated themes (albeit with contextual differences). Participants ultimately exceeded this number due to the inclusion of other stakeholders, including Directors and the Departmental Literacy Lead.

4.7.5 Interviews — Strategies to address limitations

For ease of comparison and internal consistency, only secondary schools were included in this study. The NSW public education system includes both primary (grades K-6) and secondary (grades 7-12) schools, including students from approximately ages 5-18. The reforms and conditions of work examined in this study affect the staff working in both types of schools, and it was suggested by key stakeholders in preliminary interviews that findings in both primary and secondary schools might be comparable. However, after conducting initial interviews with participants, frustration commonly emerged regarding the mismatched expertise provided by former primary school teachers who had been promoted to Directorial roles. Ultimately, the data suggested that the work of school leaders in primary and secondary schools differs enough that including both in the study would stretch the scope of its findings and compromise the depth of understanding achieved by focusing on secondary school work alone.

The sample composition was revised in response to preliminary interview findings. The head teacher and general staff interviews, as well as early principal interviews, suggested that more clarifying insights into the nature of school leaders' work could be gained by interviewing Directors — principals' Departmental line managers. As mentioned, a total of 35 participants were ultimately interviewed, with the sampling strategy shifting to include three non-school leader participants, including two Directors and a Literacy Lead from the Department of Education. These additional stakeholders provided rich, multi-positional insight into the work of school leaders through their experience working in schools *and* within the Departmental bureaucracy.

The sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its prolonged effect on the workload and availability of educators created unanticipated obstacles to data collection. In response to the need to shift to virtual and hybrid modes of teaching almost overnight, teachers and school leaders experienced extreme work intensification and widespread burnout (Wilson, Stacey and McGrath-Champ, 2020; Fray et al., 2023). This was an experience commonly raised by participants in interviews conducted at all stages of data collection, not merely during or recently after the pandemic. As a result of these external factors, participant availability was limited until 2022, and it was difficult to schedule interviews at all during this time. To combat these issues, interviews were conducted from 2020 to the end of 2021, where possible, but the data collection phase was extended until the end of 2023. The majority of interviews were conducted between 2022-23.

In addition, the pandemic significantly influenced the nature of work in schools at all levels until the end of 2021. This radically transformed the perceived impact of the School Success Model after its implementation in early 2021, as schools in NSW underwent a second phase of publicly enforced lockdowns. To navigate this, the interview protocol for participants during this period was revised to question participants about their work during the pandemic, including any relevant insights into control by and resistance to directives from the Department of Education. Interviews from 2022-2023 provided sufficient data pertaining to school leaders' work under regular conditions.

4.7.6 Data analysis

Data analysis was driven by the overarching approach of 'live coding' (Locke, Feldman and Golden-Biddle, 2015), within which both new public management concepts, and labour process theory, were applied to describe phenomena and the relationships between them.

The practice of live coding interview data formed the foundation of data analysis in this study, and guided the analysis of all findings. Explained by Locke, Feldman and Golden-Biddle as an approach where “coding and data shape each other”, live coding involves both the iteration of codes, and the constant comparison and revisitation of data (2015). Codes were formed out of an understanding of the data, rather than pre-formed and then applied after collection (Locke, Feldman and Golden-Biddle, 2015, p.373). Such practice actively encourages researchers to be open and sensitive to the discovery of unexpected findings (Locke, Feldman and Golden-Biddle, 2015). This was particularly important as research interviews were conducted over a period of three years, during which the policy landscape changed in real time. Some findings required re-contextualisation: as circumstances shifted, sometimes particular insights transformed with them. An example of this includes the findings around school leaders’ feedback to the Department in response to the impact of a new student behavioural policy on their work, introduced in detail in Chapter 6. Many participants reported that their feedback was being ignored: a representation of a broader frustration with the lack of consultation by their employers about changes to their work. Having insisted that the policy would remain despite persistent and widespread opposition, after a year, the Department actually conceded and committed to redrafting it. Constant comparison and revisitation of data allowed the reinterpretation of interview insights as this process unfolded slowly over time.

Throughout this process, efforts were made to code findings in accordance with themes that emerged from the experiences of the staff in their own words. This maintained a prioritisation of the narratives of the participants (Dunne, 2011). Synthesising these approaches, concepts from the new public management literature were applied to identify reform processes in schools. This allowed the research to map out the policy legacy of Local Schools, Local Decisions, revealing the true degree to which variations were introduced by the School Success Model. This also allowed the research to situate these changes in the new public management literature. A labour process analysis was then conducted of mechanisms of control and resistance in this work. In combination with the themes evident in the analysis of Departmental policy and context, labour process concepts were used to identify and explain the new mechanisms of control

evident in the work of participants, and the resistance evident in the experiences of staff at all levels.

The original theoretical concept of 'false-proletarianisation', introduced in Chapter 10 is the result of openness to discovery encouraged by Locke, Feldman and Golden-Biddle (2015) throughout the live coding process. While foundationally informed by labour process theory, this concept was developed to articulate findings evident in the interview data that could not yet be fully explained by existing theory.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has explained the qualitative methodological approach and methods adopted by this thesis, which synthesises a policy and context analysis with 35 rich, semi-structured interviews in order to examine the labour process of school leaders in the NSW public education system.

To best equip an investigation of the impacts of reform to the labour process of school leaders, it was necessary to combine new public management concepts with labour process theory to create an original theoretical framework. This approach has bolstered the explanatory capacity of both fields, integrating an understanding of reform to school leaders' work through the lens of management and public administration while making explicit its relationship to neoliberal political and economic forces. Through the adoption of live coding in its analysis, this thesis was able to extend the theoretical tools available to analyse the labour process of school leaders and other similar managerial roles under neoliberal reform. Rather than limiting the explanation of its findings to pre-existing concepts, it sought to explain the particular process observable in the labour process of school leaders within this 'small *n*' study.

Having canvassed the literature around neoliberal reform to public education work, developed the theoretical framework for this thesis, and outlined its methodological approach, the following chapter begins to build the empirical landscape of the School Success Model through an analysis of policy and context.

CHAPTER FIVE: FROM LOCAL DECISIONS TO SCHOOL SUCCESS: THE LEGACY OF RECENT DEVOLUTIONARY REFORM IN NSW PUBLIC EDUCATION

5.1 Introduction

In order to understand the immediate policy context of public school leaders' work in New South Wales during the time of the School Success Model, we must first look to the decade of reforms preceding it. This chapter explains the scope of the Local Schools, Local Decisions reform – the cascade of changes to work in the public education system that were implemented under the same banner at various points between 2012 and 2018. It reviews and compares the findings of previous research into principals' experiences of control over their work with the final evaluation of the reform conducted by the NSW Department of Education's Centre for Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). Out of this comparison emerges the narratives about school leaders' work during this time that appear to have shaped the development of the School Success Model. Discrepancies between these narratives and the findings of non-Departmental research are identified and discussed. In considering the specific elements of the reform and several episodes of bureaucratic transformation that occurred alongside its implementation, this chapter draws upon new public management literature to comment further on the degree to which Local Schools, Local Decisions resembles global trends in neoliberal public sector restructuring. Introducing the School Success Model, it considers the ways in which this new reform appears to respond to the challenges created by Local Schools, Local Decisions, drawing upon interview data and critiques presented by education work research of previous school autonomy reform. It ties these themes to the outcomes of school leaders' work over this period to ascertain the reform trajectory paved by Local Schools, Local Decisions and the School Success Model.

5.2 What were the objectives of Local Schools, Local Decisions that resembled new public management?

The Local Schools, Local Decisions reform era exhibited core elements of new public management reform: new strategic objectives in response to a changing business environment (Pollitt, 2000), new organisational structures and processes (Pollitt, 2000), new performance management and measurement systems (Karreman and Alvesson 2004), changes to management and managers (Butterfield et al. 2005) and the development of a 'corporate culture' (Diefenbach, 2009, p.894). The reform centred around the decentralisation of several decision-making processes to the local level of the school in key areas that included staffing, resource management and service procurement (NSW DOE, 2018). It committed to 'reducing red tape', referring to excessive bureaucracy, and aimed to promote 'working locally' with service providers as well as deepening community engagement (NSW DOE, 2018). This major change was positioned as the means to achieve new strategic objectives for the Department of Education: to better meet the specific needs of every school community through modernising, or making more efficient, a system that had been heavily centralised for a 'century'. (NSW DOE, 2018). The language chosen by the Department clearly emphasised that this reform would be the 'greatest change' to public education in the history of the state (NSW DOE, 2018), implying a causal association between centralisation, characterised as 'old', and the contemporary challenges facing the system. This framed centralisation as archaic, while also positioning the incoming reforms as a modern solution.

To support its reform to decision making processes, it introduced new systems that involved the regular, systematic collection of data, such as a strategic planning tool, a financial planning tool, and a payroll system (Dabaja, 2019). These provide ongoing material for closer methods of school-based performance management and measurement, discussed later in this thesis as mechanisms of control, and contribute to the kind of constant performance evaluation that has become ubiquitous in public sector work (Karreman and Alvesson 2004).

The reform also ushered in significant changes to the work of managing schools and, with them, established a new ‘management culture’ (Diefenbach, 2009) making principals responsible for a range of functions previously outside their remit as pedagogical leaders. These functions ranged from budgeting, accounting and payroll to facility management; and, for schools who could afford it, led to the creation of ‘business manager’ roles within schools (Dabaja, 2019). Principals reported frequently that much of this new managerial work “could not be delegated”, indicating not only the marked expansion of their roles and responsibilities but the added pressure of those responsibilities as being unable to be shared (Dabaja, 2019, p.75). In the new public management literature, similar reforms have been attributed with developing a ‘new breed’ of managers that achieve career success derived from administrative and bureaucratic opportunism rather than competence in the field they manage (Saunders, 2006). In the case of LSLD, however, a key source of dissatisfaction for school leaders was actually the lack of time these new administrative demands left to focus on pedagogical leadership — presenting a key tension between the conception of the role of the school leader embedded in this new policy trajectory of the Department, and the way that school leaders see themselves and their fundamental role in schools (Dabaja, 2019).

This extended further to encompass the creation of a corporate culture amongst school employees with the importation of corporate language, such as internal communication from the Department referring to students and parents as “customers” (Dabaja, 2019, p.85).

5.3.0 Local decisions do not equal ‘school success’: paving the way for post-new public management

In December 2020, internal Departmental reports concluded that while LSLD ‘enabled many schools to address local needs more effectively’, it had failed to produce

‘improved results’ within the broader education system (NSW DOE 2021, p.1). LSLD has been branded a failure by key stakeholders in NSW education, including the NSW Teachers Federation, the Secondary and Primary Principals Councils, the public media and the Department of Education itself (Gallop, Kavanagh and Lee, 2021), but competing narratives have been put forward from each of these stakeholders as to why.

5.3.1 Intensified workload and central control: new public management outcomes

At the end of this reform period, many of the most negative outcomes reported resembled those documented by decades of research into new public management.

The most prominent of these was an almost universal experience of intensified administrative responsibilities. A key objective of LSLD was to ‘reduce red tape’, mirroring archetypal claims that reform would address the shortcomings of bureaucracy, only for it to end up worsening the very issue it allegedly set out to combat (Protherough and Pick, 2002). The reality of this is neatly encapsulated in a quote from a study by Fitzgerald et al. 2018 in which a participant described a ‘tsunami of paperwork’, and a statewide survey of the NSW public education system in which 97% of respondents reported an increase in administrative demands (McGrath-Champ et al. 2018). Detailed submissions on the impact of LSLD were submitted by both the NSW Secondary Principals Council and the NSW Teachers Federation to the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. These submissions emphatically attested that as a result of the processes introduced and reinforced by LSLD, the focus of staff in schools at every level — including principals, executive school leadership and teachers — shifted away from education and learning towards administration and compliance (CESE, 2020).

Processes of decentralisation in public sector work, such as the devolution of decision making to schools under LSLD, have also often been accompanied by tightened central control over strategy and policy (Hoggett, 1996). Despite principals’ new responsibilities and the emphasis that the LSLD policy rhetoric placed on control and

flexibility at the school level, unsurprisingly, they reported that under LSLD, principals felt *more* restricted — particularly in the areas in which they felt they could affect the most positive change in their schools. Examples of this included the capacity to provide more job security to staff employed on a temporary or contract basis, exercising more control over the curriculum, and the tools to engage in long term financial planning (Dabaja, 2019).

These two outcomes are notable for their contradiction: despite claiming to deliver reduced administrative demands and greater control at the local level, like many other new public management reforms that preceded it, administrative burdens increased under this reform, and central control was tightened. In addition to this, central support services were significantly reduced — in some areas, they disappeared altogether (Dabaja, 2019). This result itself is new public management new public management: claiming to achieve particular outcomes and then working to achieve the opposite (Diefenbach, 2009).

5.3.2 Data collection and the mystery of “every element”

The failure of LSLD to produce a “systematic improvement of student outcomes” (NSW DOE, 2020a, p.1) was the main rationale provided by the Department for the rollback and replacement of the reform. The student outcomes in question were those recorded by the National Assessment Program, NAPLAN, a standardised test that all students must sit for in Years 3,5, 7 and 9. During their secondary schooling, this means they must complete two NAPLAN assessments — in their first year of high school, and again in Year 9 (Department of Education, 2022). NAPLAN results remained consistent with levels prior to the reform (CESE, 2020, p.10). In addition to this, performance in the Higher School Certificate (HSC), the highest educational award for students upon completion of secondary school, worsened or remained the same (CESE, 2020, p.10). Indicators of student wellbeing also worsened or remained the same (CESE, 2020, p.10).

According to CESE, these outcomes are linked closely to the alleged lack of data collected during the reform.

CESE purports to use “strong evidence” in “supporting decision-making in education delivery and development” (CESE, 2020, p.2) — a mission statement reiterated throughout its final evaluation report of LSLD. Established in 2012, this agency for performance analysis was created alongside LSLD— together, they represented a new age of datafication in NSW Public Education. In the aforementioned evaluation of the reform, which totals over one hundred pages in length, CESE emphasise that they did not attempt to review “every element” of LSLD (CESE, 2020, p.10). This attests to the practical reality that over the eight years across which the reform was rolled out, it grew beyond even the body created to study its effectiveness. The question of what remnants of this reform exist becomes a difficult one when the Department of Education itself, and its associated institutions, have not recorded or made available a catalogue of every change.

Further to this, separate changes impacted on the NSW Department of Education over the course of the reform, such as the “realignment of Department structures”, and the introduction of a national curriculum (CESE, 2020, p.9). CESE highlights that any changes to teachers’ work that took place parallel to the reform are likely to have influenced sentiment towards its impacts, or led to their conflation with the reform itself (2020, p.9). The assertion that these changes were “conflated” with LSLD despite being separate to the reform does not discuss the possibility that Departmental policy changes, especially on the scale of LSLD, might not be experienced singularly or in isolation. Contextual dimensions are known to shape policy enactment, and therefore, policy consequences in schools, extending beyond local cultural and material conditions to include the effects of broader policy (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2011). It can be argued that concurrent changes to policy are necessarily enmeshed.

Given the focus of LSLD on introducing the systematic quantification of data, it is puzzling that ultimately, the language of the CESE report frames the lack of information about the relationship between the reform and student outcomes as the responsibility of schools — “schools were not explicitly asked to demonstrate the links between their actions and improving student outcomes” (CESE, 2020, p.10). If data was at the centre of this reform, this raises the question of why there was such little focus on linking the reform to student outcomes. It was stated that improving student outcomes was not the purpose of the reform, as the aims of the reform were not explicitly linked to student outcomes (CESE, 2020). If this is to be accepted, then this lack of specificity was by curious design, as the “increased local authority” that LSLD claimed to be providing was explained by the Department as being “for quality learning and teaching” (NSW DOE, 2014, p.1). If supporting quality learning and teaching did not constitute a link to student outcomes, and yet, this was the claimed objective of providing schools with local authority, then it is unclear what the Department itself believed the purpose of the reform to be.

5.3.3 Resourcing

A further theme was the identification of resourcing, and, in particular, the need to meet the school resourcing standard as a key obstacle inhibiting the realisation of any positive outcomes from reform.

Through the introduction of the Resource Allocation Model (RAM), LSLD allocated equity funding to every school on the basis of their social, economic and geographic complexity. While this offered much needed funds to schools, and a degree of genuine autonomy for principals when deciding how to use these funds, funding alone was not always enough to procure the required support at the local level (Dabaja, 2019). The RAM, which has continued as the system of resource allocation for schools under the School Success Model, is made up of three components: a base school allocation, accounting for base staffing and operational costs; targeted funding, which provides funding for individual students who are either refugees, newly arrived in Australia and in need of intensive English support, or integrated funding support for eligible students

with adjustment needs; and ‘equity loadings’, which provide schools with more funding to address local student needs pertaining to their socio-economic background, English language proficiency, Aboriginal background, and disability (NSW DOE, 2023a). Under LSLD, schools first received control over this equity funding and were free to spend it on resources and/or initiatives that would support the challenges in their schools. For schools in more socioeconomically disadvantaged and regional and remote areas, the ‘support’ that LSLD expected principals to procure from their local markets was often not available, in that even resourcing the school to free up time for professional development — e.g. by hiring casual teachers to cover classes — was not possible (Gallop, Kavanagh and Lee, 2021). In addition to this, principals spent equity loading funds on the procurement of systems to replace those provided by the Department, such as the Departmental financial planning tool, because they found it was not suitable for meeting the needs of their school *or* able to facilitate the Department’s own expectations of them (Dabaja, 2019).

Not only was support often unavailable, leaving principals open to the mischaracterisation that they could not meet their newfound responsibilities (Gallop, Kavanagh and Lee, 2021), they also turned to the market to spend discretionary funds on services that the Department claimed to still provide, thus feeling they had no choice but to divert equity funding, which they should have been able to spend on directly supporting students, on administrative support (Dabaja, 2019).

5.3.4 *The ‘principal problem’*

In addition to the Department of Education’s own evaluation of LSLD, media reporting has more broadly constructed a ‘principal problem’, building the narrative that under LSLD, school leaders had extensive control over decision-making at the local level and that this led to a decline in educational outcomes. From CESE’s evaluation final report, the public media went on to extrapolate that inequality between students had worsened and that academic performance and wellbeing declined “after principals received more

autonomy” (Baker, 2020b, p.1). This narrative developed despite the report itself seeking to correct the misperception that principals had been given ‘autonomy’ as opposed to authority (CESE, 2020) and research indicating that while LSLD gave principals new control in some areas, it in fact did not adequately support them to exercise this control in most cases, and overall, actually increased control *over* principals through the imposition of new administrative responsibilities (Dabaja, 2022; McGrath-Champ et al., 2020).

The claim has often been made that principals supported the LSLD reform while teachers opposed it (Baker, 2022a, p.1; McGrath-Champ et al., 2017). During the pilot phase of the reform and its initial formulation, support from some principals for LSLD was recorded (McGrath-Champ et al., 2017). However, as discrepancies between the rhetoric of the reform and its outcomes alone have demonstrated, the ‘promises’ of LSLD were not necessarily realised. It is unreasonable to insist that principals’ support for a reform prior to its actual implementation has remained static over ten years — especially given the almost universal opposition to LSLD that developed over this period. This characterisation also fails to account for nuance in principals’ responses towards the reform given its *many* different elements – for example, principals expressed support for being able to spend school funds through direct engagement with local providers, as opposed to seeking services through Departmental Procurement which charged “\$30,000 to bitumen a single car space” (Dabaja, 2019). This reflected their desire to spend funds more efficiently. In contrast, they expressed significant opposition to the schoolwide increase in administrative workload brought about by the reform (CESE, 2020) and the imposition that schools locally conduct previously centralised functions such as payroll — a workload burden ultimately borne by school administrative staff rather than principals themselves (Dabaja, 2019).

Misconceptions about the scope of principal power under the reform were also perpetuated by the media, particularly in relation to budgetary control. It was stated that the “bulk” of the state’s “multi-billion dollar [education] budget” was “taken away from the Department” and put in the hands of principals (Baker, 2020a). In reality, the

majority of this budget included the fixed staffing entitlement allocated to each school – the minimum number of core permanent staff, and their functions, that each school required to operate. This entitlement was and still remains determined by the Department of Education. Under LSLD, schools were ‘given’ this money and expected to carry out the payroll responsibilities for all staff: an administrative and human resources burden that was previously performed by the Department of Education (Dabaja, 2019). Principals and their schools were not able to do anything with this money other than pay the salaries of core staff. Rather than being given budgetary control over millions of additional dollars, as the media and the LSLD rhetoric itself implied, they inherited additional administrative and human resources responsibilities with no dedicated support to carry them out.

Despite this, the claim that the discretionary budget allegedly commanded by principals included the base school allocation has also been used to frame the allegation that principals were given *too* much control. In 2020, the media alleged that the Department was “fighting” to “claw back influence over what happens in public school classrooms” (Baker, 2020a, p.1). This went as far as to imply free reign at the local level to the extent of curriculum control, with the ‘classroom’ denoting what is actually taught – an aspect of school operation over which principals have not been formally extended any additional power. The decisions of principals were framed as either “good” or “ad-hoc”, and it was declared that principals could run programs based on whatever “[took] their fancy” rather than the needs of their schools (Baker 2020b, p.1). This narrative runs counter to the one shared by principals interviewed for this research, who expressed great frustration and even emotional distress at the need to make resource allocation decisions to prioritise, in some cases, one equally vital resource over another.

The notion that poor principal decision making was responsible for the failure of LSLD has also been proffered by teacher-led submissions to the evaluation of the reform. In a submission to the CESE evaluation of LSLD, John Dixon, then General Secretary of the NSW Teachers Federation, argued that the delivery of the NSW curriculum has degraded, and immediately insinuates this is the fault of principals — “too many” of

which “[have] not [been] made to account for questionable staffing decisions” (CESE, 2020, p.108). Further to this, on the stagnation and worsening of student outcomes over the course of the reform, Dixon claimed that this “lack of accountability at the school level” for the flexible staffing approach introduced by LSLD has been “detrimental to quality education provision”, citing the “widespread” practice of assigning teachers to classes outside their appointed subject area (CESE, 2020, p.108). The emphasis here is unmistakably on the decision making of principals — Dixon considers them responsible, to a significant degree, for these issues. What goes unmentioned is the state-wide teacher shortage and the way that responsibility for this major resource allocation problem has been placed on schools at the local level, rather than on the system itself, or the microeconomic reforms and wage conditions actually necessary to address it.

The consequences of LSLD on relationships between school leaders and teachers must be accounted for when considering the legacy of its impact. LSLD established an image of school leaders —principals in particular— as individually responsible for the ways the reform was enacted in their schools, leading some teachers to express critiques of unfavourable conditions in schools as personal critiques of principals, rather than engaging with the policy setting in which these conditions arose (Gavin and Stacey, 2022). This tension in the relationship between principals and teaching staff heavily impacted principals, who felt that the complexity of policy meant teaching staff were often unaware of the constraints on principal decision making, and that they were absorbing accountability for Departmental shortcomings (Dabaja, 2019). It cannot be assumed that this tension will simply disappear alongside the LSLD reform — like many of its reform elements, it is now embedded in the relational and policy landscape of schools to which the School Success Model has been introduced.

Key aspects of the reform have been misrepresented — not only by the Department of Education, but by key stakeholders like the Federation. On behalf of the Federation, Dixon also argued that by design, the LSLD reform could not accommodate significant increases in funding, nor facilitate transparency around the allocation and spending of funds (CESE, 2020). Instead, the intent was to create public savings *through* local

managers via the ‘illusion of control’. Despite this, he goes on to declare that there could be no funding model more inefficient than delegating budgetary responsibility to over two thousand individual schools, citing underspending as evidence of this (CESE, 2020). This implies that it was local decision making itself, largely undertaken by principals, that led to the underutilisation of the funds that schools were allocated. Even when the intent behind the reform is questioned due to its disconnect from the outcomes it produced, the role of principals is not engaged with critically — they are understood as having been made responsible for functions of the reform that were not made clear to anyone, and yet also depicted as having carried out these functions unquestioningly or without resistance. Contradicting and better illustrating the reality for principals, interviews revealed that it was the obfuscation and outright concealment of total budget figures that led them to underspend (Dabaja, 2019). The scapegoating of school leaders by the Federation itself is perhaps the most telling marker that sandwiching principals between schools and communities and the government as some kind of managerial shield to absorb accountability has been a success.

5.4.0 What does the School Success Model claim to be?

Ultimately, the narratives regarding the failure of LSLD to improve educational outcomes mostly centred around local principal decision making and reduced or insufficient resourcing and support from the Department of Education. As a response to these narratives, the Department announced a second reform model in 2020, called the ‘School Success Model’, structured around the idea of ‘Shared Accountability’ between schools and the Department itself, and the provision of both Quality Support and Time for Schools.

The initial perception of this reform by key stakeholders such as the Teachers Federation and the Secondary Principal’s Council was that underneath this rhetoric, the School Success Model still closely resembled LSLD, and that it overlooked the key issues

with the previous policy approach and would thus not be addressing the very aspects of work under this reform era that led to its 'failure'.

5.4.1 Shared accountability: “We’re all responsible for student success”

The Department of Education has declared that the School Success Model is ‘about taking collective action towards driving success for students’ – this language invokes the ‘shared accountability’ objective, which appears to counter the LSLD rhetoric of ‘local responsibility’: in contrast, the School Success Model involves ‘principals, teachers and corporate teams working together’ (NSW DOE, 2020a, p.2).

More specifically than simply achieving ‘success for students’, the Department explains that the accountability to be shared is for school improvement targets developed through annual school planning. The Department outlines its role in this ‘shared accountability’ as being the delivery of ‘essential and targeted support’. It also stipulates that targets have been established for corporate leaders towards ‘shared priorities and goals’, examples including ‘creating quality time for schools and delivering evidence-based support, guidance and direction’. From this, we can imply that schools are accountable for the achievement of targets, and the Department is accountable for providing the support required to achieve these targets.

5.4.2 Quality support and time for schools

The School Success Model introduces a tiered support system for schools, and claims that this tiered system brings together school planning data, new teaching resources and specialist staff to deliver evidence-based guidance at the local level (NSW DoE 2020, p.3). Depending on the type of improvement support needed, schools are to receive

essential or more targeted support in areas such as reading, numeracy, Aboriginal HSC Attainment, behaviour and attendance (NSW DoE 2020, p.3).

This model consists of three tiers: ‘universal support’ (all schools), ‘guided support’ (872 schools) and ‘strategic support’ (259 schools). (NSW DoE 2020, p.3). Universal support, the base level of guidance provided to all schools, includes access to a self-service portal with key resources in the aforementioned areas of strategic improvement. (NSW DoE 2020, p.3). Guided support instantiates a greater role for Directors, Educational Leadership — principals’ network-based Departmental line managers — to select resources, guide and engage in regular conversations with school leaders in areas in which strategic improvement is required. The highest tier of support, strategic support, involves the development of a customised strategy by a content specialist team, a Director and a Principal, School Leadership team. This tier of support is tied to the achievement of specific, overarching system goals, emphasising a greater focus on performance management and monitoring that is tailored locally to achieve goals that are essentially the same state-wide. While the support may be local, the goals are not — they do not take into account the specific context or needs of an individual school community.

5.5.0 How do the key aims and objectives of the School Success Model respond to narratives around the failure of Local Schools, Local Decisions?

5.5.1 *‘Local Decisions’ become ‘shared responsibility’*

A feature of the School Success Model that appears to respond directly to the narrative that significant principal autonomy was both provided and found to be ineffective under LSLD is its focus on ‘shared responsibility’. Constructed mostly in the public media was the idea that principals were making ‘ad hoc’ decisions under LSLD, subjecting schools to their own personal grand visions for education and wielding unchecked power

(Baker, 2022a). The School Success Model policy rhetoric, which strategically emphasises “evidence-based support”, conveys the introduction, or rather reintroduction, of central decision-making and Departmental control — further suggesting that this central involvement provides a firmer and consistent public education service. This perpetuates the idea that principals were provided with a degree of autonomy under LSLD that could have ever seen them transform a school entirely without an appropriate evidence base — highly unlikely given the close compliance and reporting requirements over principal decision making during this period, and the oversight of regional Directors, who closely manage regional networks of principals (Dabaja, 2022). While the LSLD claimed to give principals more control, research into principals’ work during this period suggests otherwise (Dabaja, 2022). When considered alongside the School Success Model’s ostensible ‘reclamation’ of Departmental control, the long term trajectory of these successive policies may, in fact, constitute a tightening of Departmental control over time.

5.5.2 *‘Best practice’ to be modelled*

Building upon this is the School Success Model’s commitment to identifying ‘best practice’ schools with the intention of sharing these practices for other schools to emulate, instead of, presumably, the ‘ad hoc’ leadership of the LSLD policy period. This has constructed a narrative of its own: that a scalable, best practice that applies unfailingly to all schools and can be executed identically in all schools exists. Overlaying the system goals of the School Success Model, this signals a movement away from the idea of local empowerment— however tenuous this empowerment ultimately was— driven by LSLD.

The reality that perhaps local differences between schools *do* still exist and that specialised expertise at the level of the school and its community is not erased by the School Success Model policy rhetoric — after all, it promises individually adjusted

targets and targeted support. Whether this is reflected in the reality of work under the School Success Model remains to be seen.

5.5.3 Targets

The School Success Model is oriented clearly around the achievement of five targets, aiming to succeed in improving student results where LSLD was unable to. Tied closely to the notion of best practice are the very areas of practice themselves — the various aspects of school performance that are measured and combined to indicate overall results or improvement. The system wide results decried in the final evaluation of LSLD included the failure of NAPLAN results to improve overall, and the failure of HSC results to improve overall; in some cases, HSC results also worsened over the course of the LSLD policy period (CESE, 2020). CESE emphasised the lack of expectation that school budgetary decisions be linked to student outcomes under LSLD, suggesting that this contributed to the lack of improvements in educational outcomes (CESE, 2020).

Two of the original School Success Model targets were determined politically, rather than by the Department of Education, and their origins in the 2015-2023 NSW Liberal government are acknowledged in the School Success Model policy documents. The School Success Model literacy and numeracy target directly reflects the ‘NSW Premier’s Priority’ for Education, which were desired outcomes announced by then Premier Gladys Berejiklian in 2019, a year prior to the launch of the School Success Model (NSW Government, 2023). Building upon an earlier state government ‘Priority’ for education that sought to increase the number of students with NAPLAN results in the top two performance bands in 2015, the 2019 Priority aimed to raise the percentage of students in these top two bands by 15% from a baseline of 31.6% by 2023 — a goal it did not achieve, with results growing only 0.8% between 2019-2021 (Rose, 2022). The School Success Model target pertaining to Aboriginal Education also reflects a 2019 ‘Premier’s Priority’, which was to increase the number of Aboriginal students attaining a Higher School Certificate (HSC) by 50%, while also “maintaining their cultural identity” (NSW

Government, 2023, p.1). Following the election of the new Labor government in 2023, the Department of Education has declared these goals to be under review (NSW Government, 2023, p.1).

The School Success Model policy outline distinguishes between these aforementioned goals that were explicitly politically determined, and the remaining goals, which were implicitly developed by the Department of Education itself, however, the reproduction of state ideals is evident across the remaining targets. While no Premier's Priority existed in relation to HSC results, the School Success Model mirrors the NAPLAN goal previously outlined in its aspirations for HSC results under the School Success Model, specifically to increase the proportion of students' HSC results in the top two achievement bands from the 2018 result of 34.6% to 35.7% by 2022 (NSW DOE, 2023a, p.3). While NAPLAN is designed to measure fundamental literacy and numeracy skills, achievement in the top two HSC bands cannot be considered equivalent — rather, they are indicators of above average performance (NESA, 2020). This appears to overlook result improvements that occur at or below the very best performance in the system, undermining local conceptions of success and the efforts of school leaders and teachers to generate improvement in any direction other than into the top two bands.

The Department of Education expresses all these five goals quantitatively, with percentage outcomes specified for each of the 'Department targets', but lists 'school targets' separately, denoting that school targets will be 'individual' and set from either 2020 or 2021. This implies that system-wide targets were never expected to be achieved in an evenly distributed way amongst schools, acknowledging the uneven distribution of student capability between schools and allowing room for the local capacity of each school to improve their results. However, the metrics of performance against these targets remain the same state-wide — thus the monitoring and management of this performance remains the same between schools. While the support to achieve these goals may be local, the goals cannot be — they do not take into account the specific context or needs of an individual school community in the way they

measure success. At best, the Department of Education is able to move the goalposts for success.

5.5.4 *Delivering support “where schools need it the most”*

The tiered support system introduced by the School Success Model aims to deliver support ‘where schools need it the most’ (NSW DOE, 2020a), and this also appears to respond to the widespread criticism from those working in schools regarding the decimation of Departmental resources and support under LSLD (Gallop, Kavanagh and Lee, 2021). The support promised, however, is dedicated to the achievement of the central School Success Model targets explained above — notably, central services that were decimated under LSLD, such as Departmental consultants (subject experts) have not been restored. This maintains a mechanism of support delivery that appears to be problematic for two reasons that this thesis will go on to investigate. Firstly, it is not necessarily designed to meet what a school defines as its own needs — rather, it focuses on the achievement of a centrally defined set of targets that facilitate state-wide comparison, rather than local success. Secondly, in the absence of restoring central consultancy support, the question of support quality remains — it is unclear what expertise is being deployed to schools.

Furthermore, principals’ evaluation of LSLD revealed widely reported issues with the lack of clarity and poor support around how exactly to implement policy initiatives (CESE, 2020). The School Success Model’s solution to this seems to quantify and specify as much as possible — and, in the process, to leave little room for local flexibility. Given the Department’s framing of the lack of quantification or clear metric to link principal decision making to improved student performance or educational outcomes under LSLD, the School Success Model appears to have responded by creating highly specific targets and offering support that aims to specifically meet these targets. Initiatives and outcomes that fall outside these targets, or those that cannot be captured quantitatively, are not ‘worthy’ of support — including schools’ own conceptions of success for their

students. At first consideration, this may significantly influence the work school leaders are able to invest their time into with the local discretion they do have, potentially driving them to choose between supporting the socio-educational needs of their school community and the targets and expectations of the Department: especially when these objectives do not align.

5.5.5 The School Success Model: another iteration of school autonomy reform

The School Success Model rhetoric conveys a reinstatement of central support by the Department, but upon close examination, its reform elements do not directly address the damage to working conditions instigated by LSLD, nor meaningfully introduce initiatives that align with the recommendations of education work research. Considering the detrimental impacts of similar reforms in Australia revealed by continual studies over the last decade, Keddie reiterates the relevance of three original propositions made by Smyth (2012) to ensure that policies pertaining to school autonomy protect the democratic nature of education as a public good (Keddie et al., 2022). These include that above all, reforms should support schools to uphold community interests rather than individualistic, competitive notions of school performance; that decision making in schools and the quality of education delivered in schools be determined by educational, rather than economic factors; and that when schools reflect upon their practices, improvement is driven by what is societally fair and just, rather than accounting audits (Keddie et al., 2022; Smyth, 2012). The School Success Model rhetoric does de-emphasise the business functions of a school that were foregrounded by LSLD. With no explicit focus on budgetary control, the reform appears to be moving the agenda of individual schools away from marketisation and competition through financial means. However, its focus on the achievement of system-wide and system determined targets, and, in particular, educational outcomes measured by standardised tests, still frames school performance narrowly and competitively. The absence of stipulations around the managerial responsibilities of school leaders does not indicate a transformation of these responsibilities — in fact, the Resource Allocation Model (RAM) introduced under LSLD remains unchanged. Principals remain

responsible for negotiating the competing, yet equally important needs presented by their students, alongside the business and administrative necessities of the school when distributing the discretionary funds allocated to address social inequity. This suggests that school leaders must remain preoccupied with the financial management of their schools, incurring the opportunity cost of educational leadership to which they could otherwise dedicate their time. Moreover, its focus on guiding principal decision-making through shared accountability ties these decisions to centrally determined priorities, potentially constricting the capacity of schools to respond locally to the needs of their students. The apparent re-absorption of some accountability by the state continues to render invisible the unsustainable labour performed by school leaders when central support falls short: bridging the gap between a mismatch or lack of resources and the needs of a school.

The School Success Model also fails to address the key grievances of the NSW Secondary Principals' Council with the LSLD reform, which included the removal of specialist consultancy services, the shortage of counsellors and wellbeing support, and inadequate software and digital infrastructure to support the administration of schools (Gallop, Kavanagh and Lee, 2021). As Wylie (2009) made clear in her studies of over twenty years of devolved school management in New Zealand, it is a lack of adequate central support within a public education system that exacerbates inequities, rather than autonomous school leadership itself. Ultimately, the School Success Model appears to sidestep the most urgent issues facing the NSW public education system, while moving forward with policy language that reclaims central accountability and commits to central support. This suggests a likely rift between the claimed intentions of the reform and the realities it will create in schools. This thesis has positioned itself to capture the impact of this discrepancy on the work of school leaders, who will, much like under LSLD, remain at the centre of tensions between the state's administration of public education and the genuine needs of students and their communities.

5.6.0 The School Success Model: from paper to practice

To strengthen this policy and context analysis, this Chapter concludes by drawing upon primary evidence from an interview with a Deputy Principal employed to provide support services under the School Success Model. Absent from public policy statements at the time of interview, the details of their role provided early insights into the realisation of the reform and the quality of support provided to schools by the Department.

5.6.1 *'Rolling out' and 'rolling back' resources*

During the LSLD period, key stakeholders, especially the NSW Teachers Federation, criticised the severe curtailing of key services within the Department of Education that provided pedagogical support to schools (Mulheron, 2012). Consultants regarded as highly knowledgeable in their fields were available across all subject areas in the curriculum to provide tailored expertise to schools upon request. The quality of these consultant services was very well regarded amongst participants interviewed in both this research and earlier research (Dabaja, 2019).

Under the School Success Model re-emerged some services that somewhat resemble the former consultant service, including the provision of 'EAL/D Education Leaders' — a position that this study was able to gain insight into through interview participant P5. 'EAL/D' refers to 'English as an additional language or dialect', a form of additional literacy support for students who may require it due to a linguistically diverse background (NSW DOE, 2023b). This service is vital to the public education system in NSW, given that one third of students come from a language background other than English (NSW DOE, 2023b, p.1). By 2023, a total of 30 EALD Education Leaders had been installed in 25 networks — geographical regions of schools — across NSW (NSW DOE, 2023b, p.1). P5 works in this role to support 20 different schools in the same

region. They deliver professional development sessions, and work with classroom teachers to maximise learning outcomes for these students.

The participant indicated that there had not been anyone working in this capacity, providing EAL/D support, for several years, and that the role had been reconfigured since that time.

A key characteristic of this work now includes the expectation of overtime work, with many professional development sessions being delivered after school hours and meetings with stakeholder schools taking place before and after class: “on the contract, I’m only working 9-3pm, but no one does that.” (P5).

In addition to this, requests for support from schools outside the Education Leaders’ network have become commonplace due to uneven resourcing. The participant reported a positive change to the delivery of the service due to the provision of *more* EAL/D Education leaders when the role was reconfigured — a response to direct feedback from schools. They confirmed that they could service their network adequately, but that they still received requests from areas without the same equity provisions: “some other areas don’t have dedicated Education Leader roles like mine” (P5).

This represents a ‘rolling back’, to some degree, of a heavily criticised change made under or during the previous reform model. During the LSLD period, the Teachers Federation and the Secondary and Primary Principals Councils all vocally opposed the elimination of consultants.

As seen in other industrial democracies, initial periods of new public management reform have caused many perverse effects, and the policies that follow have either

attempted to address these unwanted consequences, or claimed to be addressing them (Bach and Bordogna, 2011). In this circumstance, the strong opposition to the decimation of this kind of support in schools has been met with *some* reinstatement of *some* of this support. Ultimately, it must be emphasised that in this re-emergent form, the EAL/D support is still too scarce to be adequately supporting all schools that are in need of it, thus the work itself remains intensified. As the participant emphasised, the work is on a contract-basis, rather than permanent, and the working hours exceed those outlined in their contract.

5.7 Conclusion

The outcomes produced by these consecutive reforms most evident so far include a tightening or re-regulation of control at the centre, a deepening of the political influence over central decision-making and policy, continued austerity with respect to central support services, and increased accountability at the local level. The School Success Model may be referred to as a ‘post-new public management’ policy response, aimed at addressing issues *caused* by new public management reforms, such as the lack of state control over organisations fragmented by devolution and decentralisation. While post-new public management has been associated with the resurgence of public values and re-democratisation of public services through vertical re-integration — reversing the processes of decentralisation, post-new public management has also referred, more generally, to reforms that have followed any original new public management reforms — noting that they are not always attempts to reverse or correct new public management reforms (Christensen and Lægreid, 2022). At face value, the rhetoric of the School Success Model appears to embody post-new public management ideals, introducing objectives and commitments that correspond to the ‘failings’ of the reform preceding it. Despite claims to the contrary and a significant renovation of policy rhetoric, Local Schools, Local Decisions and the School Success Model appear to have been working towards common objectives. It seems that the trajectory of reform has not changed — instead, like many other neoliberal initiatives, it has merely reinvented itself — predominantly in the pursuit of cost cutting, asking educators to do more with

less. To continue building understanding of the real-world outcomes of the School Success Model, the following chapter, Chapter 6, presents the impacts of the reform on the work of school leaders. It compares its policy commitments to the detailed empirical findings from the qualitative interviews conducted for this thesis, building a rich understanding of the complexity of school leaders' work to further contextualise the landscape with which this reform interacts.

CHAPTER SIX: THE EMPIRICAL LANDSCAPE OF SCHOOL LEADERS' WORK

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from semi-structured, qualitative interviews with school leaders and key stakeholders in NSW public secondary schools who were asked about their experiences of work under the School Success Model policy era. It answers the first research question of this thesis: what challenges are most evident in school leaders' work during the School Success Model policy period? The School Success Model committed to five key deliverables: (1) evidence-based guidance on effective practice that improves student outcomes, (2) more support for schools that need it the most, (3) less administrative burden, (4) stronger and clearer responsibilities for schools and the system, and (5) recognition and the scaling of practice of our most successful schools (NSW DOE, 2020b). While the different contexts of all participants presented challenges specific to their schools and communities, system-wide challenges emerged in response to the state-wide staffing shortage, the COVID-19 pandemic, the proposed introduction of a new behaviour policy called 'Inclusive, Engaging and Respectful Schools', and the implementation of the 'Team Around a School' approach to supporting students with social and behavioural issues. The effectiveness of local, embedded resources surfaced as a counter to this external support. Overarching difficulties also materialised in relation to the inflexibility of policy to accommodate the practical realities of school leadership. These broad challenges and experiences that shaped the landscape of work for school leaders must be understood as major factors that interacted with the School Success Model and its implementation. The themes emerging from this chapter also provide a navigational foundation from which to better chart the detailed findings in the chapters to follow.

6.2 The state-wide staffing shortage

Workload issues in the NSW Department of Education system predate the implementation of the School Success Model, and are linked closely to a persistent state-wide staffing shortage (Gallop, 2021). A public sector wage cap, maintained by the conservative Liberal National Party state government, has been identified as exacerbating the conditions that led to this shortage (Gallop, 2021; NSWTF, 2021). The maximum increase in pay for teachers in the public system was limited to no more than 1.5% per year from 2021 until the cessation of their term in 2023 (Gallop, 2021). Gallop identified a teaching shortage as burdening the system from 2021, recommending that permanent staffing be increased in order to combat the shortage of casual teachers (Gallop, 2021). The shortage persists, with the latest data available indicating over 2000 permanent teaching roles remaining unfilled across the state (Gerke, 2024).

The staffing shortage produced resourcing challenges for school leaders that affected the operation of every aspect of their schools. All participants of this research discussed the ways in which their work, and the functioning of their schools, had been impacted by persistent vacancies and the imperative to develop strategies for the best possible delivery of education despite insufficient staff. Commonly, the rotation of teachers was discussed, where classes could not be covered adequately, so classes took 'turns':

We've taken all the fat out of our timetable. There's not a teacher who is under load: that means that there's some classes that have a timetable of 3 or 4 teachers that are delivering one course to them, but at least they've got face to face teaching. And I've got some classes that have not seen a teacher this year, and we do our best to rotate them, like...you've had your 2 weeks without a teacher [for a particular subject], now it's going to be your 2 weeks without a teacher... (P17)

Complementary to the rotation of teachers was the reality that often, some classes could not be assigned any teachers whatsoever, and so the priority of school leaders was to provide supervision in order to meet the basic duty of care. This meant combining classes and ensuring that a member of staff at least watched over them:

I keep saying to my Director, I cannot achieve the targets set for me by the Department. We're going backwards, not forwards, because in the height of the staffing crisis...I would have 25 teachers away every day in a school of 70 teachers. I would have teachers who would be collapsing in classes due to workload, before being scheduled to teach two classes at once, and I would also have teachers running supervision in the playground so we're supervising, not teaching. Where they might put five classes in the playground, like corralled into an area, and go: 'well it's Period 2, your teachers are away. We've got no more casual teachers'. There aren't enough of them, so they're being supervised. How can they actually improve their reading and numeracy if I've got that many classes out in the playground unsupervised or minimally supervised? There's no way I can achieve those targets. (P13)

As P13 explained, the task of improving educational outcomes or otherwise meeting system-determined targets, such as those outlined in the School Success Model, became impossible. The strain of the staffing shortage also led teachers to the point of collapse — from the perspective of P13, this was due to the pressure of taking on the usual responsibilities of multiple teachers. Wellbeing issues widely affected staff, and not merely the quality of education received by students. Furthermore, P12 expressed frustration that given these conditions, their school could still receive 'nominated transfers', the centrally mediated transfers of teachers between schools for a range of reasons, including earned incentives:

If there's a nominated transfer being sent to you from another school there's nothing you can do about it, you've got that person regardless of your needs and that happened to me many times. And now all of a sudden you know you need to fill a

position, and someone will ring you and say they're sending you this teacher that you have no opportunity to appoint, no opportunity to check and no opportunity to evaluate. We haven't had an ESL [English-as-a-second-language] teacher at this school for 10 years, even though 96% of our students are NESB [from non-English speaking backgrounds]. We haven't had a computing studies teacher for 10 years — isn't the IT sector our future? If we can't offer that subject, we're not giving students the best opportunity to maximise their future. (P12)

The issue identified here was not with the ability for teachers to move schools via nominated transfer, but rather, the fact that persistent vacancies were allowed to remain unfilled while a school had no choice but to accept staff in areas they did not need.

In schools with complex social needs, recruitment was regarded as even more difficult — particularly in schools perceived by teachers and communities as “residual” (P12). As P12 asked rhetorically: “a colleague of mine at a neighbouring school, it's a semi-selective school [that admits high performing students], can't attract quality staff. If he can't, then what hope will I have?” (P12). P28 described needing to be “creative” with staffing solutions, such as surveying existing staff to determine whether they possessed additional skills that could be deployed to better address persistent vacancies, but also meet the broader needs of the school community.

The high turnover of staff in some schools, particularly due to teachers leaving the profession, has led to the loss of institutional knowledge at the local level and an additional need to train and develop teachers in leadership roles. At the time of interview, P12 had four relieving head teachers, two of which were in their first year: “We've had that massive turnover of executive experience and, in the middle management...there's capacity there, but we're building the capacity of those leaders... most of them have been peers who are now relieving and leading their colleagues” (P12). Promoting staff before they might be considered ‘ready’ in an environment

where the teaching supply was inadequate means that greater resources need to be directed to their training and development.

6.3 The COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic period of 2020-2021, school leaders were responsible for overseeing the delivery of education and the operation of their schools while subject to unprecedented state and federal health directives. The main challenges of this period included two major lockdowns of 100 days each, rapid shifts to online education delivery and then hybrid online-in person delivery, and magnified responsibilities around student and staff wellbeing. Compounding the existing workload issues in schools, school leaders faced even further intensification and stress as they aimed to meet the needs of their communities while also complying with the expectations of the state. P22 encapsulated this succinctly, stating: “COVID has almost killed us.”

Under the crisis circumstances of the pandemic, school leaders in NSW were being asked to do more than ever in responding to the specific needs of their schools, engaging in unique problem solving in a rapidly changing environment. The sudden reliance on technology to deliver education meant schools experienced differing challenges in relation to the skills and training of their staff, and the capacity for students to access suitable hardware devices and access to the internet. Many schools used discretionary, equity funding to purchase internet and laptops for students in need (P1, P2, P3, P22, P23 and P24).

In schools with low levels of remote technological infrastructure prior to the pandemic, especially those in low socioeconomic areas, the already existing challenges of converting to hybrid delivery were exacerbated by the need to arrange connectivity for these students:

COVID was a nightmare because we were not a school that was focussed on technology. A lot of schools use their phones — our kids don't have phones at school, and we don't have laptops for every kid. So that was really difficult for us because it was about upskilling the staff. We went from one day to the next, we were on school holidays and then instead of returning to school as normal, suddenly we were in lockdown. It was really hard to work out exactly what teachers were going to do, what support staff were going to do, what the office staff were going to do...working out roles for all those people and making sure there was a little bit of equity across the place so that no one ended up with supporting staff who couldn't use technology all the time. And I think I'm good at jumping in, but I'm hopeless at technology. So there was all that to work with, which was a challenge to everyone, but it was the continual acknowledgement and the support of staff, which really I believe made a difference. And the kids who we couldn't reach, you know, we had to create packages for them because they don't have technology. So the work had to be photocopied and put into envelopes and then driven to their houses. It's hundreds and hundreds of envelopes with work and packages and mimicking what the other kids were doing. It was a lot of a lot of things to juggle. (P22)

The allocation and distribution of work across staff was left entirely to school leaders — some of which “didn't mind the way the Department handled it, because they left us alone to get it all done” (P9). This did come at the cost of professional development, as school leaders prioritised keeping their staff and students informed, managing their compliance with state directives, and overseeing wellbeing issues:

Professional learning went on the backburner because preparing the curriculum for teaching online was a whole new demand and experience. Whole school professional learning and things specifically related to direction and whole school teams (literacy, numeracy, formative assessment team where people work across KLAs to meet the interests of the whole school and make sure its working). None of these things could take place — it was all updating people, pursuing wellbeing issues that arose with students, updating technology and finding creative solutions. (P1)

The workload conditions of the pandemic also led to permanent impacts on staff wellbeing. In some cases, this led to staff taking medical or other forms of leave to recover — again, placing additional strain on schools already dealing with the challenges of a staffing shortage:

I also see that the chronic workload of, you know, within – for teaching staff and for schools generally, I think has really increased: mark online, do online, go offline, teach online, teach some kids online, prepare the kids just in case they're not at school, but then by the way, also have your own kids at home while you're teaching at home, and then when you come back, oh, that's right, you've got to take that class because your colleague's sick, or you don't have half the [staff capacity]. We actually have had a couple of people off [taking leave] where [the workload of the pandemic] actually, really impacted on their health. I mean, that's just – you know, the stop-start interruption. Schools have always been a really stable, consistent thing in people's lives, but it's been so much stop and start, it's actually become quite wearing. (P9)

The widespread wellbeing issues and burnout produced by the pandemic within the existing workforce also exacerbated school leaders' challenges in securing full-time teachers:

I could employ and put people on a [temporary] contract before COVID...now, it's impossible, like I can't fill every spot, and I've got all these part-timers, so people – because they're tired, they don't want to work full-time, they want that flexible work. But in a school, because teaching and learning, and schools, are based on relationships, it's hard having bits of people, part-time. Because some people can't work full-time, we've got gaps all over the place where people are working part-time for their own wellbeing, you know, and their own families and things like that. You sacrifice money to have some sort of life. (P9)

Teachers expressed desire to work part-time in record numbers, but as P9 explained, configuring a high proportion of a school's teaching staff on a part-time basis creates an additional burden of coordination in schools, to which complex scheduling needs are already inherent. Further to this, school leaders indicated that increases in the proportion of part-time teachers in the workforce can compromise on the quality and continuity of education delivery.

6.4 The Inclusive, Engaging and Respectful Schools (IER) policy and the 'Team Around a School'

During the pandemic, the Department proposed a new behavioural policy for students, titled Inclusive, Engaging and Respectful Schools (IER). The IER policy was then implemented in 2022, despite opposition from school leaders, staff, their representative bodies, and both the NSW Labor and Greens political parties (NSW Teachers Federation, 2022). While the iteration of the policy that was ultimately implemented had been somewhat revised in response to significant feedback from schools, IER severely limited the remedies available for schools to respond to student behavioural issues, including a reduction in permissible suspension times, the narrowing of suspension criteria, a restriction on sending students home unless they pose an immediate threat to the safety of others, and the requirement that the families of students at risk of suspension be first sent a warning, lengthening the time between behavioural issues and suspension. The chief function of the IER was to curtail suspension rates system-wide (Baker, 2022b). Throughout 2021, school leaders were made aware of the proposed policy. Participants of this research indicated that both the Primary and Secondary Principals' Councils, as well as the Teachers Federation, provided feedback and engaged in consultation with the Department regarding the significant issues it posed for behavioural management in schools. The impacts of the IER detailed by school leaders interviewed for this research included increased workload, heightened concerns around staff and student wellbeing, resources being cut from other areas, and an emphasis on the divide between expertise in schools and decision making in the Department of Education.

The importance of explaining the interaction between the IER policy and the School Success Model is made clear through an understanding of the social complexity inherent to many schools in the NSW public education system. School leaders often shared that attempts to meet the administrative demands of the School Success Model were complicated by the non-educational workload generated by social complexity in their school. This spanned a wide range of behavioural, wellbeing and family and community related issues, in addition to issues stemming from student learning difficulties, which can be interdependent and inextricable. P28, for example, explained that their deputy principals make at least two to three reports to the NSW Department of Communities and Justice every day — frequently enough that the Department’s hotline employees knew these deputy principals by name. To highlight the severity of the behavioural issues in P12’s school, as well as their ripple effects in the broader school community, P12 gestured to the cupboard behind him and explained: “there are year twelve jerseys in there that I’ve kept for students who fled overseas to join terrorist organisations, but never returned”. In addition to this, at the time of their interview, P12 was dealing with a student who had been charged with committing aggravated sexual assault. P17 expressed exasperation at the way in which the work of school leadership cannot focus solely on achieving targets, or educational outcomes, when students are facing harm or committing harm to others:

The numbers of critical incident reports that we do...like while all that’s going on you have the business of the school? We've got kids that you know horrendous things are happening to, we've got kids that are perpetuating violence in the community, they're victims of violence, and they create havoc and hell. We've got kids being sexually assaulted in their homes, kids who are hungry, and you know kids from out-of-home care who are heavily traumatised. All of those things that just create mayhem. (P17)

Noting this context, school leaders were frustrated with the timing of the IER policy consultation period during the COVID-19 pandemic, given the intensification of their workload in the face of crisis. P24 likened the process of inviting feedback on policy

during this period to “being placed under duress”. While school leaders were provided with channels from the Department to voice concerns about these policies, the sentiment was that concerns were not genuinely considered. School leaders were also informed through internal Departmental communication that the terms of the IER policy were developed by The Kids (formerly ‘Telethon Kids’), a non-government research institute for childhood disease. The board of The Kids includes former politicians, such as Minister for Foreign Affairs 2013-18 Julie Bishop, and current managing directors of professional services firms, as well as one of Australia’s largest conglomerates, Wesfarmers. School leaders emphasised this in their interviews as being reflective of the disconnect between the interests driving the policies and the reality of work in schools:

The Department claimed to be consulting us, but there was no [real] consultation. Somehow, I found the time to give feedback, but it don’t think it made any difference (P1)

These people [The Kids Research Institute] have never been in schools. They are so removed from what we are doing (P9)

The policy is really insulting in the way it talks about schools, as if it is meeting a need that has never been met before. The solutions it proposes do not work. It will only create huge issues for us. (P3)

I think it was very disrespectful, from where they started. They gave us about two weeks to get a submission in on the policy. The tone in there, the way it was written, was written in a fashion that basically made us sound like we do not do too much. I know we’re doing a lot of the stuff they say we should [to manage behaviour], but they implied we don’t already do those things. I found that difficult to digest, it coloured my thinking on the whole thing. (P11)

The range of comments quoted above also capture a universal sense amongst the school leaders interviewed that the IER policy reflected a disregard for their expertise. Beyond a lack of engagement with their understanding of what is practicable in schools, school leaders expressed that the policy did not acknowledge the complex and extensive efforts taken to address behavioural issues at the local level, undermining this difficult and important work.

To support schools with the reformed practices introduced by the IER policy and assist with the management of complex behavioural issues, the ‘Team Around a School’ approach was developed, where non-school based specialists were assembled by the Department to externally service all schools from the centre (NSW DOE, 2024). This was comprised of a learning and wellbeing team, facilitators and coordinators to support interagency relationships between schools and various social welfare bodies, the Department’s own psychologists, and 121 newly created behaviour specialist roles (NSW DOE, 2021). However, to resource the creation of these behaviour specialists, central Departmental positions that previously existed to service the Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) framework had to be dissolved. A continuing initiative designed to support schools with significant behavioural issues, the PBL framework requires the collection of data to identify problematic behaviour, assist teachers to reflect on the effectiveness of their practice, and inform decision making around the improvement of learning environments in the school. Where PBL coaches were previously deployed to assist schools to begin engaging with this framework, these positions were discontinued in order to create behavioural specialist positions in support of the IER:

The whole IER policy is written in PBL language. No problem for us, because we’re a PBL school, but one thing [the Department] did right back at the start of the whole process is they ripped the PBL coaches out across the state and they re-badged them as behaviour support people. Once they worked out they were going to put a policy into place, they had to support it, so they created these behaviour specialists and they ripped the PBL coaches out to create them. So, all this PBL stuff that we have to do, in

a school that wasn't already PBL, there's no one really there anymore to do it, to assist the school...unless you go to your Director, and [are lucky enough] to find someone in the local Ed services team that can do it, like maybe one of the behaviour Assistant Principals or something. (P11)

As the purpose of PBL coaches was to initiate the significant work of implementing PBL processes, they were never intended to provide indefinite support. However, as P11 identifies in the above quote, if a school had not already taken advantage of PBL coaches to implement the framework, there would now be limited to no support available for them to begin adopting these processes. While the PBL framework and the IER policy both concern behavioural issues in schools, they are not substitutes for one another, with PBL being designed to drive the internal processes required for continuous improvement of the learning environment, and the IER policy regulating the management of individual student behavioural issues. The IER policy did not replace the PBL framework, which continues in schools today. As the Department explains, PBL is not a finite program that schools complete, but a dynamic framework that can support schools to maintain positive learning environments as their student populations constantly change (NSW Department of Education, 2023). Given the existing workload issues in schools perpetuated by the staffing shortage, the removal of central support from PBL coaches meant that choosing to implement PBL would pose a source of further workload strain for affected schools.

In practice, school leaders also faced challenges around the IER relating to the poor capacity of the Team Around a School to service the requirements of schools with significant behavioural needs. The requirements of the policy also led to the creation of further administrative demands. P13 explained that the response of the Departmental support attached to the IER policy was not only protracted and time-inefficient, but created more work for staff in schools and the Team Around a School:

So we might request the Team Around the School, and that would include things like the learning and wellbeing officer; the Assistant Principal Learning and Support might come and do a functional behaviour assessment of the child; make some recommended strategies. Then we will put out another behaviour support plan; we'll implement that and we will keep on going. We might have escalated to an array of staff beyond the school that should be there to help, but they're supposed to respond within 48 hours...we might get a reply in 48 hours saying I've received your referral, but they're not here within 48 hours and so when they come, they come, they watch – it might be weeks before a new plan is written up and that doesn't fix anything. So all we've done is drowned the staff in excessive burden of paperwork and referrals. The authors of this policy do not understand how many students need these interventions. If we were only talking about one class or one in the school that's one thing, but we're talking about 4-5 in that class, and they are *all* also very challenging. So there's just not enough of these people in the team around this school that are coming up. (P13)

The key deficiencies in this policy response identified by P13 revolve around the limitations of a non-school based team attempting to service the behavioural needs of many schools. While the Department provided a commitment to school leaders that they would receive a response within 48 hours if seeking behavioural support, P13 highlights that in practice, this has not meant in-school support — rather, it has simply meant confirmation that a referral has been registered. Moreover, as P13 emphasises, in schools with a high proportion of severe behavioural issues, the model is even more lacking due to the volume of issues they face. The workload issues created by the Team Around a School approach, including those as a direct result of the IER policy itself as well as through its conversion of PBL coaches into behavioural specialists, and the insufficiency of the support provided by the Team Around a School, raises questions around the lack of consultation with school leaders in the formation of the policy. For school leaders, the conversion of existing central support to aid in the implementation of a new, adjacent policy exemplified the way in which the Department appears to redistribute resources without considering potential impacts. As P11 commented:

I think the overriding belief of most principals is there's just not enough educational knowledge in the development of some of this stuff [the IER policy], and I think...there's a lot of business sense up there and a lot of corporate sense, but there's not a lot of education sense. The Department's developed that over time with a very business-like, top-heavy structure. I think that's really impacted the way they've done stuff and I think it's also impacted how we view, or how I view them anyway. They've sort of put a wedge in between corporate and schools and you've got this corporate structure and this school structure, and they don't really talk to each other. It's like it [policy] gets dumped down without even talking [to us]. (P11)

The ecosystem of Departmental support promised by the Team Around a School appeared in-depth and comprehensive. Despite this, some school leaders found that not only were the relevant support roles too few in number to adequately service schools, they were also unequipped to provide any specialist expertise beyond the approaches to behavioural issues already implemented in schools:

The learning and wellbeing team, the Assistant Principal (AP) learning support — by centralising the model of support, and saying 'but we have this overarching team that's here to support all schools,...they are spread exceptionally thin. You can't access them until you've tried everything. Schools function as these little microcosms, these little worlds. Your job and your purpose every day is to meet the needs of you students and your community. So when you have a problem, you throw everything you have at it that you can within the structure of your school, and that is what everyone expects you to do as well. You do not qualify for extra support until you have done everything you possibly can. Only then you can access this extra support. When the stars align, and the AP comes in to observe a student, then you go back to zero. Schools have done everything, they're absolutely exhausted, and then someone comes in and says 'have you tried time out?'. It prolongs the pain. It has not been a successful model. Schools feel exceptionally hamstrung, because there are all these processes in place and it appears there is so much support but the resources

are stretched far too thin. The behaviour specialists are not behaviour specialists — they do not have any more expertise in managing behavioural issues than we do. (P1)

As P1 explains, the extensive non-school based network of resources created around the IER policy constructed the illusion of support, but in reality, has been incapable of providing timely or helpful intervention. Compounding the challenges that arise from a small external team attempting to service the entire public education system, their lack of technical expertise in schools with severe behavioural cases became evident. P1's experience of a behaviour specialist suggesting "time out" in the case of severe behavioural issues was echoed by P12, who was also offered inadequate support:

I had a student at the school who, as early as year 7, would find out where illegal brothels were and hide in the car park with a machete and rob the customers, then he'd rob the workers when they were leaving. He then got a taser online and he'd go out the train station just when it was getting on dusk, and he'd rob what he believed to be vulnerable and international students. He hit them with the taser, robbed their phone and their bags and things like that. So we got the behaviour specialist to come in and give us some advice on how to best deal with him. And the behaviour specialist said to me, why don't you just ignore his behaviour. You know if he's on his mobile phone just let him, don't talk too harshly to him, and you know, at the end of the lesson maybe, if he's been okay let him go 10 minutes early before the other kids. That was the advice the behaviour specialist gave us about *this* boy. (P12)

Further to this, P12 found that the behaviour specialist they were assigned had almost no experience teaching students with behavioural issues:

The people who they recruit into these roles, what's their experience? The person that gave me this expert advice on this boy in our school said: 'Oh yeah, I taught a

year 10 class out at [High School in Western Sydney] once, and they were a pretty tough class, and this is what I did.' Who's applying for these jobs, who's appointing these people in these roles? These are your behaviour experts, giving you advice that people have tried like 20 years ago. And we're way past that in terms of our practices. (P12)

The inability of external, non-school based Departmental staff to provide meaningful or constructive advice was understood by school leaders to relate to their inexperience in schools. As P1 surmised, "all of a sudden, the Department decided they needed behavioural specialists, but no one was born a behavioural specialist. They are creating these positions because they sound like what we need."

Other perspectives on the effectiveness of the Team Around a School acknowledged that the support provided offered some short term, positive impact, but that it did not lead to sustained change:

Does it produce an impact on those students? Yes, there's a response...but not fast enough. Does it bring about a change in those behaviours or an engagement from those kids because now their needs are being met? No. That's what the issue is. If I was to look at each of those kids, I find that their behaviours continue on in spite of the extra eyes watching them, doing the functional behaviour assessment. Their behaviours still continue, and the most common thing for us to do is by the time we've hit year 9 and we've already seen a couple of years of concerning behaviours, our pathway is more likely to be encouragement into an apprenticeship as quickly as possible. So that by the time they're eligible to be granted a certificate of exemption from enrolment in a school — they can't get that until they're in year 10 — I'm looking at year 10 kids as soon as I can to get them into work because that's a better pathway than them staying here at school, being disengaged when they don't want to be here. (P13)

When presented with severe behavioural issues and chronic disengagement with education, P13 described a process whereby students of concern in their school are guided towards a pathway most appropriate for them: even if it is a non-academic one. This approach sits outside the expectations of the Department as outlined by the targets around attendance and academic achievement in the School Success Model, as well as the aim of the IER policy to establish suspension or removal from schools as a last resort.

The obstructive, ineffective elements of the IER and the Team Around a School were understood by school leaders to be the product of political influence over the Department. This perspective was chiefly shaped by the involvement of an external research institute in the development of this policy, and the evident lack of engagement and consultation with school leaders and their expertise at the level of the school itself. Moreover, some of the resources within the Team Around a School were identified as having existed previously. Reformatted into the Team Around a School, they were found to be less accessible and effective:

It's kind of like if you've got a bottle of water, and you pour it into all these different glasses, if you try to pour it back into the bottle again you find you've lost some of the water on the way. School Services rebranded into Team Around a School. They rebrand, they restructure, they get rid of positions, they create positions, but the resourcing of it all is different. There used to be behaviour consultants attached to every network, but the Team Around a School is for more than one network, so they are spread thinner. (P1)

The implementation of the IER policy and the Team Around a School highlight the challenges of social complexity that face school leaders and impact staff in schools. When considering the effects of the School Success Model on their work, social and behavioural issues in schools must be acknowledged as a structural feature in many schools, particularly those in communities of low-socioeconomic status. In addition to

this, the case of the IER demonstrated the lack of incorporation of local expertise in the development of new policy, and seemingly, the lack of Departmental understanding of the challenges in school leaders' work.

6.5 Student Support Officers: the importance of local, embedded resources

In contrast to the issues presented by the external support model of the Team Around the School, school leaders reported highly positive experiences with Student Support Officers (SSOs). SSOs are non-teaching members of a school's wellbeing team, focused on the support and implementation of whole-school wellbeing strategies (NSW Department of Education, 2024c). The functions of SSOs are flexible, and thus differ depending on the needs of their particular school. Introduced as part of the staffing entitlement, schools were provided with these positions regardless of their level of equity funding — schools are guaranteed SSOs, who were hired centrally, and do not have to pay for them using discretionary funds. The positive impact of SSOs was largely attributed to their capacity to assist schools flexibly, especially through understanding the school's needs over time:

The SSOs have been so important because they are *in* schools, and we are running at something like 43% coverage of counsellors across the state, so the SSOs help connect parents to social agencies, and are someone that students can talk to. The SSO is in the school. What's needed in schools is people who can respond to the daily challenges that you face, that are always changing. In a school, you end up just doing what's needed, so the SSO does a lot of unofficial counselling work. (P1)

Corroborating this, P28 described the provision of an SSO as "wonderful," owing particularly to their employment of an SSO with a counselling background. Even though P28's SSO was not a psychologist, they were able to assist with the wellbeing needs of students through their skills and experience. In a school with a high degree of social

complexity, the inability to employ a school counsellor due to the staffing shortage meant that P28's students only had access to the SSO.

In P12's case, the success of the SSO was also identified as reliant on their ability to hire and retain a person who is caring and genuinely motivated to make a difference in the lives of students. Even in acknowledging this, P12 pointed out that an SSO was not sourced for all schools, and that the positive impact they had experienced was dependent on the qualities of the person:

And that SSO role is only a new one, and I know that some schools didn't get one. Some struggled to recruit one. I've got the best one I could possibly think of and she's doing amazing things with these students because she just cares and wants to have an impact on their life and wants to improve their lives. SSOs who have a connection with the students within the community have a tremendous amount of impact. (P12)

To offer further context around the importance of embedded expertise within the school community, P12 discussed the centrality of genuine relationships and understanding between school staff and students to the successful delivery of education:

I feel for my young teachers who don't know – they don't really know yet what to do with the young people in their care. They face abuse, they face it from students, they face it from parents, they face it in the community — they see a lack of respect in the community for the profession. In saying that, I've never been more respected than what I have been in this school. But you know it's something you need to earn, it doesn't come straight away. I think that's where some teachers fail, they think that the position automatically gives them that respect and it doesn't. The students here ...they know which of their teachers are the teachers that really care about them. On

the contrary, I've been into a teacher's class who has been here for 35 years, and who I would say has failed for 35 years. She'll have all these resources, she'll have all these structures, she'll have all these activities for the class. And if someone else had them, it would work perfectly but because she... she *hates* them, it has been a total failure every time. And it must be such a frustrating life to live knowing that after 35 years you still haven't got it right. (P12)

School leaders' high regard for SSOs reveals the need for resources that are provided as a guarantee within the staffing entitlement, capable of flexibly adapting to the evolving needs of schools, and, above all, embedded in schools, rather than limited, external or inaccessible. While SSOs are one example of a centrally ensured resource that possesses these characteristics, the expertise of school leaders indicates that more generally, the development of local knowledge and authentic community-based relationships are vital to the service of education and cannot be forced, manufactured, or imposed.

6.7 Policy inflexibility

A key frustration identified for school leaders during the School Success Model period was the lack of policy flexibility from the Department in areas corresponding to system-wide challenges. In the face of crises such as the staffing shortage, COVID-19, and the burgeoning social and behavioural issues in their communities, school leaders commented on particular circumstances where they felt prevailing policy could have been amended in some way to accommodate the most difficult aspects of school management.

Operating within what they called the "constructs" of the Department, P28 explained that they were using an SSO to fulfil some of the responsibilities of a counsellor, as, like many schools across the state, had been unable to find a counsellor to work for them full time:

We're a highly complex school, and we are entitled to a full-time counsellor, but we only have half a counsellor, realistically. We have been able to employ an SSO who comes from a counselling background — not a psychologist, but someone with counselling experience, so we can't employ her as a school psychologist, we have to employ her as an SSO. But since the staffing entitlement position for the psychologist is going to waste, I don't see why the Department won't allow us to make an exception, to hire someone else similar with that money. There's a staffing shortage — it's just going unused. (P28)

While their staffing entitlement includes a full-time counsellor, the funds designated for employing that counsellor must remain unspent: they cannot be repurposed to hire any other type of staff. Even though P28 was able to develop a solution to the shortage of counselling support in their school through hiring an SSO, no exemptions could be made for them to divert the funds allocated from their staffing entitlement in order to replicate this solution by hiring a second SSO. As this solution was only necessitated by conditions of the staffing shortage, the lack of flexibility in this policy was frustrating to P28.

In the case of P13, the refusal of the Department to provide them with additional staff in the form of a School Learning Support Officer (SLSO — distinct from the SSO position mentioned earlier in this chapter) left the school responsible to pay for a full-time member of staff to attend to one student:

Our autism unit is four classes. Each class has seven children in the class. They have a teacher and they have a student learning support officer, so an SLSO in each class. So it's two staff to every seven kids in the unit. That's the ratio. Generally speaking, that works beautifully. However, there are restrictions sometimes in the way that the Department lets us place kids that are sometimes not very flexible. So I've got a new enrolment this year who is the most complex child my school has ever had. He

really needs like what we call an SSP or a School for Specific Purposes. He needs to be in a special school, not a unit within a mainstream school, and his intellectual diagnosis is not quite low enough to allow for that to happen, hence he's in my school, but he needs his own SLSO, and I can't get him that unless I pay for it myself. He's nearly non-verbal; he's quite violent; he hits my staff; he bites my staff; he could spit on my staff and he displays a lot of incredibly complex behaviours. That means he needs his own SLSO and we can't get it for him. I have to just find money out of my own budget to buy it. The Department won't give one to us. But because he's not quite low enough on the intellectual sliding scale they won't let us put him in a unit, an SSP where he really needs to be. That's an example of how rigid they can be. Like you've got to fit the descriptors and I think sometimes there needs to be a little bit more greyness around the edge and here that particular case study, because we have never asked in seven years if we could have that extra layer, and I'm not going to ask willy nilly because I realise that there's limits to resourcing, but this particular child really needs that, and I don't see us being able to provide for that. We're going to have to go through a lot of staff assault in order to get to that. (P13)

P13 was resigned to the reality that their staff would be continuously subject to assault, knowing that even the physical endangerment of teachers was not enough for the Department to make an exemption.

These examples of policy inflexibility represented, to school leaders, the difficulty of navigating structural challenges and their impacts without adequate support from the system. School leaders often had no choice but to devise their own solutions to unique problems, the causes of which were beyond their control. Given the exceptional circumstances of the staffing shortage, in conjunction with the effects of the pandemic and its strain on schools, heightened frustration was expressed with respect to instances where central support was not extended, or solutions that school leaders viewed as perfectly reasonable were rejected.

6.8 Conclusion

The challenges reviewed in this chapter provide the necessary context required for the analysis of mechanisms of control and resistance in school leaders' work that follows in Chapters 7, 8 and 9. School leaders' work is complex, but any examination of their work during the period of time in which interviews were conducted requires an understanding of the further and sustained difficulties in their work produced by the staffing shortage, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Inclusive, Engaging and Respectful Schools policy. The School Success Model was imposed upon school leaders' work during a period in which these system-wide challenges produced different effects on individual schools. A clear picture of these challenges problematises the degree to which school leaders' work was then constrained by the reform model, and contextualises their motivations for resisting aspects of it. The next chapter begins to explain these constraints in the labour process of school leaders, presenting evidence of the most routine mechanisms of control in their work.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ROUTINE MECHANISMS OF CONTROL IN THE LABOUR PROCESS OF SCHOOL LEADERS

7.1 Introduction

This chapter and the chapter to follow answer the second research question of this thesis, identifying control mechanisms in the labour process of school leaders under the School Success Model reform period. Principals and their executive leadership teams possess decision-making authority and, to some extent, managerial power at the local level of the school. Despite this, they remain employees of the Department of Education, bringing this local control into constant negotiation with changing policy, government directives, and political agendas. An examination of the tensions that arise within this pseudo-managerial labour process reveals the ways in which school leaders are controlled by the Department of Education, and to what end.

Looking first at the everyday pressures in school leaders' work, this chapter begins with an analysis of intensification in the labour process. As the responsibilities of the role continue to expand, especially in service to the administration of the Department, there has been no commensurate increase in resources or support. Building upon this, the chapter argues that school leaders have experienced the degradation of their work as educational leadership has been forcibly deprioritised. Where school leaders faced the consequences of system-wide challenges, data collection was found to function as a control mechanism for deflecting the accountability of the state. State control over education policy is also discussed for its use as a political tool, exerting pressure over

the work of school management without primary consideration for the delivery of education itself. These mechanisms of control are the most routine in the labour process, overtly shaping school leaders' work to fulfil the neoliberal ideals of efficiency driven by new public management reform models.

7.2 The intensification of school leaders' work

School leaders reported acutely increased administrative demands, necessitating that they service the ever-growing compliance and reporting requirements of the Department without additional resources to support this work. Administrative workload challenges were reported to permeate all layers of a school, and were not confined to the work of school leaders. The workload of school leaders thus includes both the specific administrative load of school-wide management and further oversight of teaching staff compliance:

The biggest issue for me and my teaching staff —and not even just teaching staff, non-teaching staff too— pretty much all layers of staffing in schools at the moment, in my mind, is workload, and the Department's failure to respond to these increasing workload issues that we face. There is...excessive data that they give us to manage and interpret. Masses of compliance that they give us to check on. Every teacher writing risk assessments for basically every activity they run. We need to be so all over every additional needs child in their care. That's on top of their teaching, their marking, their assessing and all those things and their reporting. And

yet the Department does not acknowledge that workload in terms of addressing this issue. So the biggest issue I find in resourcing is they've got so much to do, and even today I had a two hour meeting with the work health and safety consultant, and that's just an example of compliance, checking have you done this, have you done the other? And they are going through this list of things I've got to have done. I've then got to do similar things with my staff. Have you done this? Have you done that? And I'm always checking their compliance. (P13)

The consequences of this intensified workload on overall school management are wide-ranging; as P13 explains below, some teaching staff are never able to achieve a sense of control over their work and experience serious detriment to their health and wellbeing. School leaders bear the brunt of these consequences, mediating the effects on their staff while fielding Departmental expectations that remain rigid despite the blatant unsustainability of these demands:

I've got staff in my school who finish work, might leave here at 5 o'clock, go home, do dinner with their family and start again and work into the wee small hours. I've got one head teacher as an example who regularly sends me emails at 3 am multiple times per week which shows me that almost every night she is staying up until 2-3 am to do school work, and she's sleeping four hours, and I know that's true because I watch her fall asleep in executive meetings when she stops running around the school all day, and then she sits still and she's dropping off. Staff are burning out and then they're getting sick and then they're away or they're bailing from the

profession all together. I've got lots and lots of teachers who are working 60-70 hours a week in order to manage their workload and they are still not getting to the bottom of the pile. And yet...the Department is still scrutinising our work with all sorts of – a real sense – I am not going to say all sorts of *smacks* that they put in place, but it feels like if you don't do these things, then we're held to account for them. But they are unreasonable, the level of them is beyond unreasonable. I cannot just fathom it, to me that is the biggest issue of all is the lack of time to adequately attend to the range of tasks that the Department expects of teachers, executives and principals in schools. (P13)

In many cases, discretionary equity funding was directed towards the employment of additional deputy principals to meet these additional administrative demands. P4, a deputy principal employed above the staffing entitlement of their school, is tasked with the coordination of health and safety matters:

So while the principal is, as the site manager, ultimately responsible for health and safety, I coordinate all of the activities around that. So site visits, lockdowns, any sort of issues that we have about student or staff safety, that's something that I manage. I'm actually working on a document that I have to update by tomorrow that I was given a couple of hours ago. And that's the interesting sort of nature of the work in a school [wryly]: that you seldom get one thing down before something else is given to you or something else becomes a priority that isn't necessarily going to impact on the learning of kids or the academic achievement of the students, but it comes from the

system. And that's part of the frustration of being in a school... how priorities are, I guess, forced upon you to meet particular targets. And that's not about educational targets, it's about submitting things that are required [by the Department]. So that's just one thing I do [in my role]. (P4).

While their responsibilities extend beyond health and safety, this area in particular demands a high volume of administrative work due to ever-growing compliance requirements from the Department. The creation of their position as an additional deputy principal to meet these requirements must be paid for through the use of discretionary funding allocated to the school on the basis of equity. Financially, this indicates a significant burden for a school like that of P4, who must direct funds designated to support the social complexity of the student population towards this administrative workload instead. Regarding the management of the health and safety of an entire school, P1 explained: "in any other industry, a worksite of 1000 people or more would definitely have at least one compliance manager as part of the resources dedicated to that worksite. Despite this, to appropriately manage health and safety, we have no choice but to draw from funding that should go to students."

The opportunity cost presented by these growing administrative requirements is not only financial but also temporal, in that it consumes a significant amount of school leaders' time that could be dedicated to alternative work. As P4 makes clear, the intensification of school leaders' administrative workload directly reduces the time left for them to focus on educational leadership or other education-oriented initiatives.

Rather than dedicating more of their time to overseeing the professional development of staff, the educational programs within their school, or even the wellbeing of students—all common responsibilities of deputies—a large component of their work is simply meeting administrative requirements. P1 also emphasised that the “huge responsibility attached to overseeing the health and safety of an entire school community by leaders who are trained as educators sometimes requires a level of expertise that is not actually there, but derived out from under the pressures of Departmental accountability.”

The nature of these “forced” priorities was also identified, in some instances, as being completely irrelevant to school activities. P16, whose school “was built after they stopped using asbestos — I’ve got an asbestos register that proves I have no asbestos,” still had to fill out a form pertaining to asbestos risk, as well as arrange for a physical inspection, if they wanted so much as a “new power outlet installed in a wall.” The ‘bloated’ character of bureaucracy is a common complaint that has developed in response to the administrative requirements that underpin compliance in public systems, including education (Churcher and Talbot, 2020). As bureaucracies seek to sustain themselves, they may continuously add requirements to the workload of public servants without revising their existing responsibilities. School leaders experience the impact of this through the further intensification of their work:

Because the bureaucracy in the state office has enlarged to such a ridiculous extent, there’s all these different directors and deputy-secretaries now creating policies, that all go to a bottleneck in schools. But they don’t talk to each other — one may be

handling the asbestos, and they're saying right— this has to be done, this has to be done, but that's all down on me, along with curriculum, maintenance, HR: every directorate is creating a new form. That all hits on schools. So the latest little winner was health and safety. We've now got 13 forms we have to fill out for a single injury. There's got to be a register of the injuries. We used to just ring up the 1800 number, you ring them up and you'd record your injury. Now you have to fill out a form, put it in the register and then call them. Who's doing that work? The same people who are doing the work for the Assets Department and the HR Department: me and [sarcastically] the ever-increasing number of bureaucrats that I'm using my RAM funding to fund to complete the policy paperwork for the department. (P16)

This also reveals the nature of the relationships between directorates within the Department, as school leaders' experiences suggest that no checks or balances exist through which the likely impact of new policy expectations on school leaders are considered.

Additionally, the siloing of aspects of the Departmental bureaucracy demands the “double and triple handling of information” (P1) by school leaders: despite inputting daily attendance data into Sentral, the cloud-based school management system used by NSW public schools, school leaders also had to manually input this same data into an additional application during the COVID pandemic — even though the Department already had this information. Further examples were provided of the siloed nature of the Department placing additional work on school leaders:

Every time there's an incident here at the school, I have to ring up health and safety and give them all the information. Then, if there's a child incident you'll ring child wellbeing, you'll give them all the information. You then have to put all that into dot points to your Director, because health and safety won't talk to the Director. The bottleneck is here with me. So I've got to give all the separate people the same information because they won't talk to each other. Why can't they talk to each other? (P16).

The burgeoning administrative workload that ultimately falls on the leadership team within a school reveals a source of ongoing tension between their traditional responsibilities as leaders and their ever-increasing obligations to the state. As a mechanism of control, work intensification has seen equity funding directed away from student needs to fulfil bureaucratic obligations, subverting the local management of school resource allocation. In addition, it increasingly erodes and disrupts the delivery of education and directly associated labour through adverse effects on their own wellbeing, staff wellbeing, and the opportunity cost of their time. When examined in the context of heavily reduced and increasingly narrow central support services, the intensification of work constituted by growing administrative demands has seen schools performing a greater share of work that should be the responsibility of the centre. Instead, cost cutting has concentrated labour in the “bottleneck” (P16) of school leaders: rather than sharing accountability with an integrated Department, school leaders must continuously provide evidence of compliance that relieves the Department of further responsibility to ensure satisfactory standards in schools.

7.3 The degradation of school leaders' work

School leaders' experiences under the School Success Model indicate the degradation of their work: as the state has sought to tighten control over their labour process, the quality of the work they are expected to complete has declined. In conjunction with this, in some instances, school leaders reported a lack of Departmental support for locally designed initiatives driven by educational leadership, as well as a reduction in the time available to implement these initiatives due to the intensification of their work.

Conflicting experiences emerged amongst participants regarding the interaction between the volume and detail of policy regulating work, and the degradation of the work itself. The daily need to respond to challenging, often novel student dilemmas, such as those discussed in Chapter 6, was identified as both an essential element of work as a school leader, and one that requires significant judgement capabilities:

They [Directors and/or Departmental services] might say to you later, well, this is what the policy tells you to do, but you have to respond in the moment. It's impossible to know everything in the policies and you can't always wait to find out.
(P3)

P23, a deputy principal, described the "ever-increasing volume" of Departmental policy as being a "scaffold" — explaining that not only have the expectations of their role

continued to become more prescriptive, they have also functioned to reduce the capacity for school leaders to make “educational leadership decisions” specific to their context.

I feel like I should have an economics degree [to do this job]. I feel like students are now products. *We* are products. Everything has become commodified...and expendable. If a principal's not...if a school is not performing to the expectation or to the target set, principals are so expendable, because they don't make any decisions anymore. The Department can just flick them out and install someone else, you know? Because there really isn't much individual discretion in that type of role anymore. In terms of my career as well, I can't see that as a principal your educational vision will be executed — it's just another link in the chain of command where you're carrying out the instructions of the Department. The profession has been so downgraded. (P23).

Eliminating school leaders' scope to innovate within schools appears to be a strategy to manage the number of staff leaving education altogether as a result of sustained poor working conditions. P23 expressed the view that the “scaffold needs to be strong, because we have so many people leaving the profession”. High rates of turnover in the NSW public education system due to difficult working conditions have meant that teachers are not accumulating the institutional wisdom traditionally possessed by those in executive roles. Teachers are promoted into leadership roles on an accelerated timeline out of necessity, rather than the requisite experience and capability required

for the position. This was recently evident in the work of P19, who had just overseen the promotion of a head teacher via a merit selection process, commenting that: “I would have liked this person to have gained more experience [before taking on head teacher responsibilities] but we just don’t have any other options”. Rather than turning the focus of the state towards attracting more people to the profession through a meaningful reduction of the work intensification that is driving this turnover, a trend confirmed by a report on the attrition of graduate teachers (NESA, 2020), P23 believes that overwhelming amounts of policy have created the conditions for “anyone to do these roles now”.

Principals also discussed the way this policy scaffold functions to “stifle creativity” (P19):

A massive anti-innovative mindset has occurred. [The Department of Education] are super conservative. There’s a narrow agenda around the HSC, attendance targets — there’s no rhetoric, no conversation about innovation. Innovative schools used to be explored, held up, encouraged. All of that has gone. It’s a really poor climate in which to be innovating. (P18)

Faced with mounting wellbeing issues in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and persistent vacancies within their school, P19 sought out a private consultant to support staff wellbeing, and paid for their services using their discretionary equity funding. This commitment to wellbeing support was well received by staff, and P19 expressed pride

at having made a positive difference with this decision. Despite the ostensible success of this strategy to address the wellbeing challenges in the school, P19 immediately encountered Departmental messaging that long term reliance on an external initiative like this was inadvisable.

The department have a philosophy that they've got a [sufficient] system for staff welfare. You need to use their system, not an external consultant. They've got a philosophy that you should not be employing anyone with a view to [keeping them around for] long term use. Their view is you could bring some one in for a short period of time, but the idea would then be that you would upskill your staff with that person's knowledge and skills, and then you'd manage it. The teachers and head teachers would manage it. My Director [at the time] spoke to me and said it's great you've got this consultant, but you should actually phase her out and then you could then hook on to the wellbeing framework. (P19)

While P19's Director recognised the value of the wellbeing consultant, their immediate response was to direct P19 to find a way to continue this initiative without paying for the wellbeing consultant. However, in the absence of additional labour, the school had no capacity to run such a program itself — it did not have the staff or time spare. The consultant would, for example, check in with the school a few weeks prior to every visit and remind staff of their previous wellbeing commitments to ensure they would be able to maximally utilise every session. It was precisely this kind of support —the kind only a specialist external to the school could provide— that created a sense amongst the staff

of teachers' wellbeing having been made a priority. As a non-essential program, if responsibility for this initiative had been allocated to one person or dispersed amongst executive staff, it would not have been a reasonable addition to existing workloads. This is especially true given that overwhelming workloads are a key factor driving wellbeing issues among staff. "We just wouldn't be doing this," P19 commented matter-of-factly.

The experience of P19 exhibits similarities to the other ways in which participants have observed the degradation of their work. When exercising their conceptual autonomy as educational leaders, they are not always supported to continue — even when they have developed a constructive solution within the context of their schools. In the case of P19, the close relationship between work intensification and degradation is also made clear. P19 was paradoxically encouraged to further intensify the workload of their staff to continue a program designed to support their wellbeing. P19's creative use of resources to address challenges experienced by their staff was then discouraged, inhibiting authentic educational leadership in favour of an inflexible Departmental commitment to cost rationalisation.

The prescriptive nature of policy was perceived to have had some benefits. P23 also reported that, in contrast, a positive aspect to heavily prescriptive policy has been that it "takes a bit of the pressure off leadership" — in that they did not always have to justify their expectations to staff by appealing to evidence or drawing upon trust. Rather, they could simply declare that "this is the way it has to be, because the Department says so". When considered alongside P23's reality that "a huge part of my

job is trying to reduce the administrative workload [imposed by the Department] for my staff, wherever possible”, a dualistic picture emerges. On one hand, as a deputy principal, P23 serves the interests of their staff through preventing administrative requirements from being passed down, but, on the other, negotiates the demands of their own role through leveraging direct Departmental control.

The prioritisation of administrative responsibilities was also identified as a mechanism functioning to degrade the work of school leaders. Overlapping with the administrative intensification of work discussed in section 7.2, forms of intensification were evident in more subjective, conceptual processes, such as the development of planning documents. When drafting their annual school plan, P19 was instructed by their Director to rewrite their vision statement, “not because it wasn’t suitable,” but because “it wasn’t long enough”. Already faced with an overwhelming workload, P19 was frustrated by this as it required the allocation of further time to a task for reasons that did not have any direct link to the delivery of education. Rather than the overall quality, or the alignment of the vision statement to the needs of their community, they understood the instruction to be based in their Director’s preference that all vision statements in their regional network resemble each other. While this form of degradation is not universal, and was not common to the experiences of other participants, the specific experience of P19 indicates the potential for subjective control over administration to feature in the labour processes of other school leaders within the system — either now, or increasingly in the future.

Each of these examples of work degradation in the labour process of school leaders reveal a reduced scope for conceptual work, educational leadership, and education-focused labour through the narrowing of policy. Similar to the outcome discussed with respect to work intensification, control over the nature and quality of school leaders' work appears to produce uniformity in the pursuit of cost rationalisation. In the case of subjective control over school leaders that prioritises administrative standards over education delivery, the degradation of work through the privileging of arbitrary administrative standards is present in the labour process as a perverse consequence of cost-focused, rather than education-focused, education system.

7.4 Data collection as a mechanism for shifting responsibility and accountability

School leaders' work indicates that the School Success Model has expanded the devolution of data collection to schools first initiated by Local Schools, Local Decisions. Schools are required to collect data in ways specified by the Department, but this data then sits within schools, rather than centrally. This renders schools responsible for the provision of these data to address local issues, diverting responsibility from the system itself.

One principal explained that she was instructed to record data in a way that obscured the true extent of the impact of the severe, state-wide staffing shortage on students in her school. Due to the timetabling challenges presented by persistent vacancies in over

20 full time staff positions, in one year, over 1000 classes were either merged with other classes or placed in the library with no supervision.

When that data came to light, I was told to measure it in a different way. If the same class was put in the library more than once, I could only count it once, I couldn't count it twice. (P21)

At the time this instruction was received, a NSW parliamentary inquiry had begun investigating the impact of the teacher shortage in the public education system. This principal consequently experienced the contradiction of having to convince the Department of the severity of staffing issues in their school despite the earlier implication that the data from their school would draw unwanted scrutiny from the inquiry. She continued that:

The response from the Department to the inquiry was that they couldn't assess that data — they can't accurately analyse [the state of my school] because they can't see how many teachers are on leave or on secondment, because that data is held within my school. It then comes back to me, at the local level, having to [do the work] to give them this data and to make them believe it. (P21)

Through exercising control over data collection in schools, the Department has been able to shift accountability for the consequences of inadequate central support.

School leaders have been prevented from recording data accurately, and then both made complicit in the concealment of the true challenges in their schools while also held accountable for the ongoing implications of these challenges.

The reporting requirements of the School Success Model were also framed as existing in parallel to the constructive use of data in schools, serving a purpose that did not intersect with the genuine improvement of academic performance or other indicators in schools. Some school leaders conduct their own, school-based research and analysis on top of the data collection and reporting required by the Department in order to better support school improvement:

What's driving what happens in school is quality leadership. There is so much data in schools, and good leaders interrogate that data. A lot of the data we need to collect for the Department does not help us. In our school, we conduct our own surveys, our own tailored research in addition to the data we collect for the Department, in order to evaluate what we are doing, and how we can better meet the needs of our students. Every school, dependent on its leadership, will develop a strategy to ensure that there is progress. The School Success Model enables the *system* to report, and that's where it becomes irrelevant. It's not for us. (P4)

The localisation of data and data collection to the level of the individual school is a process that began under the devolutionary Local Schools, Local Decisions reform model. Despite the renewed commitment to central support and re-centralisation that

underpinned the School Success Model rhetoric, the collection of data remains devolved. The case of P21 clearly demonstrates the exploitation of this devolved data collection processes by the state, constituting a mechanism of control that has dishonestly shifted accountability and responsibility for systemic issues away from the state and onto school leaders. The case of P4 reveals that the data collected serves the interests of the state, and that school leaders must collect their own data or analyse data separately to drive genuine improvement — an activity that requires additional labour in spite of, rather than in conjunction with, the expectations of the state. Once again, this contradicts the School Success Model’s claimed commitment to sharing responsibility and accountability for the quality of education delivery.

7.5 State control over education policy as a political tool

The notion that the School Success Model has been a means of generating positive change or improvement within schools was challenged by school leaders, particularly in objection to its representation in the media and the public announcement of other contemporaneous Departmental policies during the reform period. The Department presented the School Success Model as a reform to work in schools that would support them to implement best pedagogical practice, and therefore achieve better student performance. Instead, over time, the School Success Model was eventually understood by school leaders as a way to quantify the work of education in pursuit of politically deployable performance metrics:

The NAPLAN testing, the check-ins... like all that kind of stuff. That's just to make the Department look good. I think, you know, like look at all the things that we've done. I'm sure there are things that they do where they flog us [as in, show us off], 'look how good we are', but what is it really *for* though? Is it really for growth? Is it really to impact on the profession, to empower the profession, to impact on the kids? Or is it just about face: how I look to the public, how I answer to politicians, political leaders? (P7)

The impact of government media announcements as a mechanism of control was raised frequently by participants. School leaders perceived political forces, rather than educational ones, to be exercising a disproportionate degree of control over their work.

Departmental initiatives driving changes to education work were perceived by participants to prioritise two factors: what notionally sounds as if it will address an issue within the education system, and what can be measured quantitatively, and therefore, more easily.

There's massive focus on mathematics becoming compulsory in 2024, and that stems from the Premier of NSW [at the time —Gladys Berejiklian] putting forward this idea that the 'three Rs' (reading, writing, and arithmetic) was the way you needed to operate in schools. She took the political bent that everybody needs the basics, to appear like the government was doing something to improve schools, so mathematics needs to become compulsory right up until the end of schooling

[instead of up until the penultimate stage of schooling]. She just announced this in the media. So then in schools, we were having conversations about how it's not possible for maths to be compulsory when there's a teacher shortage like this — there's even more of a teacher shortage in maths, so we don't have teachers to teach it, and if you're going to make it compulsory...then there will be non-mathematics trained teachers teaching maths. All your qualified maths teachers will have to teach the senior courses, which would then mean your junior students won't be taught by qualified teachers. All of these flow on effects come from these political decisions that are made without consulting educators first. (P6)

This politically oriented approach to policy change was contrasted with initiatives that were more likely to create a sustained, constructive impact on the quality of education, and developed in consultation with educators in schools. Parallel issues were reported regarding the political announcement of funding being provided to schools. While they received a significant amount of additional funding during COVID, P6 was unable to spend most of it as it was tied to the requirement that it be spent on staffing. Given the environmental constraints of the pandemic, in conjunction with the state-wide staffing shortage, they were unable to make use of the majority of this funding as they were unable to recruit candidates suitable for the needs at their school. They simply could not find staff: “in a staffing shortage, it is people you need — not just funding to employ them. The funding is useless without anyone to employ” (P6). The provision of this funding was obviously impractical, and so when it was promoted in the media, it struck one school leader as being politically motivated:

“They will advertise how wonderful they are for giving out all this funding during COVID, but won’t mention that half the schools had to give the funding back...they’re just using it politically. There’s a political agenda behind all of it.” (P6)

Schools were required to return any unspent funding, further entrenching the sense that policy and resourcing decisions are not always made with genuine consideration for what would address the challenges faced in schools. Rather, the attention of the state was perceived to be on managing the public image of education rather than the efficacy of this funding to actually generate improvement in the areas it claimed to be addressing.

This was commented upon further by P1, a principal who emphasised the relationship between quantitative indicators and the political image management of the Department:

“The way that they measure everything is through key performance indicators...so they pick a project. It doesn’t matter if it’s the right thing to do. All that matters is that they can turn around and say “we’ve set up Teach for Australia”, or “we’ve hired 32 behaviour specialists: these are the things *we’ve* done to address the issues.” There’s no real evaluation of whether they were the best things to do. They are running education like all other public service departments and that’s not the best thing to do — it doesn’t work that way, that’s not how you’re going to maximise results.” (P1).

Initiatives such as Teach for Australia, a program designed to incentivise newly trained teachers to work in understaffed, remote areas of the country, and the creation of specialist positions to support behavioural needs in schools, were cited by P1 as examples of policy change that look and sound favourable to the public. Key performance indicators were understood to be quantified or highly simplified “bites” of information suitable to feature in media narratives designed to gain political favour. This was perceived to construct a sense of the Department having “done” something positive for schools (P1). While P1 was not necessarily insinuating that either of these initiatives were ineffectual, they emphasised that real evaluation of initiative success has been absent — contrasting heavily with the frequency with which they are strategically mentioned in the media.

The state’s control over education policy and its use of education as a political tool undermines the nature of education policy altogether. School leaders do not merely suspect that changes to their work are sometimes driven solely by political interests, their work is directly affected by the obligation to implement changes that do not account for existing conditions in schools. When the practical realities of these changes produce challenges in their work, school leaders are bound to accommodate and problem-solve at the local level — beholden to political decision making and the image management of the state above the technical interests of education delivery.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has begun to illustrate the foundations of control in the labour process of school leaders under the School Success Model policy period, drawing on rich interview data to explain the most routine, quotidian ways in which work is constrained. Through the expansion of their administrative responsibilities, school leaders carry out an increasing volume of the labour required to oversee compliance in a centralised system. As the Departmental resources available to directly support school management have decreased, school leaders must perform more of the work formerly completed by the Departmental bureaucracy. Siloing within the bureaucracy also contributes to “bottlenecks” in school leaders’ work, as they mediate between and repeatedly address the compliance requirements dictated by different Departmental directorates.

Following on from this, school leaders have experienced a degradation of their work, subject to increasingly prescriptive policy frameworks at the same time as their capacity to engage in the conceptual work of school leadership is eroded. Despite the commitment of the School Success Model to strengthening system support and sharing accountability for system wide challenges, data collection, as a mechanism of control, has led school leaders to become complicit in processes by which the state deflects accountability. Overlaying these sources of state control over the everyday work of school leadership is the use of education policy as a political tool, regularly generating disruption in the delivery of education as policy change is driven by optics and public perception rather than constructive, education-focused initiatives.

As marked as the impact of these routine control mechanisms has been, school leaders' labour process also includes more structural and subjective forms of control. The next chapter will examine these further manifestations of state power, developing a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which their work is being reshaped.

CHAPTER EIGHT: STRUCTURAL MECHANISMS OF CONTROL IN THE LABOUR PROCESS OF SCHOOL LEADERS

8.1 Introduction

This chapter continues to answer the second research question of this thesis, identifying the structural mechanisms of control evident in the labour process of school leaders under the School Success Model reform period. While Chapter 7 presented evidence of the control mechanisms that create the most routine pressures in school leaders' work, more indirect forms of control function alongside these mechanisms in order to obfuscate state power and its role in their exploitation. Elements of subjective control, particularly through the quantification of performance management, a lack of transparency in the employment relationship, and the refusal of the Department to acknowledge system-wide challenges, ensure the extraction of further labour from school leaders in the absence of central support.

These mechanisms constitute an overarching separation of conception — the political and bureaucratic decision-making power of the Department of Education — from execution — the local leadership and delivery of education in schools — to tighten neoliberal state control over the public service from a distance. Instances where the state has relinquished control are also discussed, highlighting the strategic capacity of the Department to offer greater autonomy to schools when it aligns with state interests.

8.2 The quantification of performance management as a control mechanism

School leaders strongly indicated that over time, the quantification of performance management at the core of the School Success Model has created constant feelings of inadequacy. It has demanded performance through setting of unreachable targets: “success [in schools] comes from this fear-based system: it’s not what you’re doing [that’s emphasised], it’s what you’re not doing enough of” (P21).

The use of data to both set narrow targets and measure school performance, thereby measuring a school’s educational ‘success’, was criticised due to their inability to capture the many different forms progress can take in a school. School leaders called into question the Departmental standard of using a previous cohort’s academic results and other relevant indicators, such as attendance rates, as benchmarks for the performance of future cohorts:

One school isn’t the same as another school, and while [the Department], they’re going to do the analysis of all of the data, they’re then asking you to do something about improving student outcomes from a baseline, and that baseline isn’t relevant to the students whose outcomes you’re trying to improve. So that’s the issue for me.
(P4)

The tethering of the School Success Model's tiered support system for schools to the results of NAPLAN, the national standardised test of literacy and numeracy skills, was not considered sensitive enough to truly capture the support needs of a school:

The first problem with the targets is that they were connected to NAPLAN. It's an arbitrary way to measure whether or not a student can read. To tie support, inextricably to NAPLAN results...I think it's misguided. There's just so many variables that will impact the data that a particular school collects around NAPLAN, there's not a great deal that many schools, particularly disadvantaged ones, can do to shift those results. They have no chance of meeting their targets, which they were just told about—no negotiation—very George Orwell. And the top two bands...if you have kids moving from lower bands to middle bands, they don't care about that. They just want to know if they've moved into the top two bands. (P31)

P31 also voiced criticism of the focus placed by the School Success Model targets on the number of students achieving results in the top two of the six achievement bands possible. This was perceived universally by participants as an unfairly restrictive benchmark for the definition of improvement, particularly in schools with student populations that have higher learning support needs. The majority of the student cohort in some schools will not achieve any results in the top two bands.

P23 explained that their school is "really good at growth," for example, assisting students to progress from a band two result to a band four result, but this type of

improvement remains unrecognised by the School Success Model targets. As their allocated targets are the metric by which their performance as a school is evaluated, and these targets focus on the number of students achieving band five and six results, then despite the progress their students have made, they still appear to be a “really bad school” (P23).

It has also had individualised effects on their working relationships, particularly with their Directors and other “corporate” employees within the Department. P21 recounted a meeting with their Director in which P21 cried, verbalising that they were experiencing extreme stress at work, and facing antagonism from staff arising from the staff shortage issues in their school. The response from the Director was to tell them to “just work harder”. Despite the fact this encounter caused them further distress, P21 still expressed empathy for their Director: “I know they’ve got their own targets to meet, and that’s just what it is —everyone is looking out for themselves, trying to keep their own jobs” (P21). The reduction of performance management to the achievement of statistical targets has, in the view of some school leaders, created an environment where human aspects of the work, such as emotional support, are ignored and deprioritised.

The quantification of school performance through targets imposed from the top down has reduced formal notions of success in schools to the achievement of statistics that are highly limited in their explanatory capacity. Furthermore, these targets are set via processes that exclude the school leadership responsible for meeting them.

Abstracted from the delivery of education, this not only bypasses consideration for the whole student, but the educator as well — impacting not only the management of staff and students, but the management of school leaders themselves, as exemplified in the case of P21 and the transformation of their relationship with their Director. Considered alongside the mechanisms of control discussed throughout this chapter, the quantification of performance management appears yet again to serve state interests. The oversimplification of educational outcomes through narrow targets defines success as success that can be easily measured and deployed politically. It demands improvement that can be comfortably recognised by a wide audience — the achievement of results in the top two bands — rather than authentic measures of progress contingent on the specific needs and abilities of student populations.

8.3.0 Lack of transparency as a mechanism for deflecting state accountability

Looking next at the level of transparency in the employment relationship between school leaders and the state, this section discusses three cases where the Department was reported to have deliberately concealed information. These include the metrics used to decide which tier of support schools would receive under the School Success Model, a lack of transparency around a temporary-to-permanent staff conversion initiative, and the bureaucratic denial of the staffing shortage in the NSW education system. These instances demonstrate a lack of transparency functioning as a mechanism for deflecting state accountability, exercising control over schools and school leaders without reciprocal channels for state accountability and support.

8.3.1 Lack of transparency around the School Success Model support metrics and targets

Interviews revealed that the data used to determine the level of support schools would receive under the School Success Model in pursuit of its system-wide targets were not well understood or made explicit to school leaders. As a mechanism of control, the exclusion of school leaders from this process has facilitated the further abrogation of state accountability. The School Success Model introduced a system of classification for all schools, placing them into one of three tiers to establish the level of support they would be allocated in the pursuit of system-wide improvement targets. The basis upon which they were classified was explained in the core policy document as “the school’s current results and their level of need to achieve progress” (DOE, 2020, p.4). Beyond this general description, no further information was provided to school leaders, or even the staff sent to support them in achieving these targets.

Highlighting this was the experience of P31, whose position as a Lead Specialist in Secondary Literacy was created to service the School Success Model targets. P31 was responsible for providing assistance to schools who were classified as requiring ‘strategic support’, the highest level of support. As a literacy specialist, P31’s focus was to aid their assigned schools in increasing the number of students scoring in the top two performance bands in NAPLAN. P31 emphasised the degree of mystery evident to them around these processes which, to P31, suggested deliberate obfuscation.

“There’s so much secret squirrel business that occurs — no one knows anything. Approximately fifty schools every year, for the last 3 years of doing this, will get targeted based on ‘underperformance’, obviously, in NAPLAN, but it’s run by CESE [the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation] as far as I know, and the school will always ask how they were nominated, and I say I don’t know! Even I don’t know that! It’s this closely guarded secret.” (P31).

Upon being informed that P31’s time providing support to a school would be concluding, at which point the school would be promoted to ‘guided support’, or the middle tier of the support classifications, P31 was also left completely unaware of the improvement criteria that had secured this result: “we lose control of it [when a school moves up to guided support], and it’s almost like this dark space that no one wants to talk about...it has very much a Voldemort [sinister and mysterious] feel about it.” Despite their specialist role, P31 was not offered any opportunity to provide consultation on the ongoing needs of a school. The decision to conclude a school’s strategic support remained concealed from P31 and the leaders of the supported schools, indicating the complete exclusion of school and specialist staff from this process.

As previously discussed, the targets themselves were considered unachievable by all the school leaders interviewed, failing to set appropriate goals for improvement in each school. This degraded and erased the recognition of unquantifiable work. In addition,

school leaders also commented on the lack of transparency around the determination of these targets. The core policy document presents some explanation, stating that “ambitious, yet reasonable” school targets would be “set in the context of the performance of schools with statistically similar characteristics” (DOE, 2022, p.2). This context alone was not regarded by school leaders as a “reasonable”, with P27 clarifying that “right down the road, you’ve got a school that seems just like ours from the outside— roughly same number of students, same area, but completely different demographic that comes with different social issues to ours.” Ultimately, the targets allocated did not appear to correspond with a school’s likely capacity to meet them: “the targets were all about a particular number, and they just pulled those numbers, well...they didn’t write them down out of their bum, but...for all we know, they could have. They were completely unrealistic.” (P2)

The rational control exercised by the imposition of centrally determined targets warrants close examination, not simply as an example of bureaucratic efforts to tighten control at the local level, but as an instance of contradiction between policy and reality. System-wide targets and the more specific, individual school targets designed to work towards them were distinguished by the promise of “negotiation” at the school level: language that disappeared from the initial 2020 policy rhetoric from 2022 onwards. Expecting at least a conversation with their Directors about the targets they would be instructed to achieve, no school leaders interviewed were offered the opportunity to engage in negotiation or discussion around these targets. This seems to present further evidence of the Department reneging on their commitment to schools, choosing to move

away from collaborative, trust-based relationships with school leaders, and towards an approach to system administration that disregards local expertise entirely.

Regarding both the revision of the School Success Model with respect to the matter of negotiated targets, and broader policy in the Department of Education, school leaders often voiced a belief that “things are being made up as they go along” (P2). This perspective was informed by significant episodes of poorly managed implementation, such as the funding of expensive, bespoke software programs for school administration that were abandoned by the Department soon after their roll-out. Schools were not consulted on their usability, were unable to provide feedback on common issues, and consequently still preferred using private-sector alternatives to the Departmental offering that was “riddled with problems” (P2).

The development of individual school targets without any demonstrable consideration for the particularities of each school also exhibits a continuation of the neoliberal logics that insist “school success” is only a matter of efficient practice implementation. School leaders conveyed their definition of school success to be grounded in the uniqueness of their school, which accounted for the complex socio-economic context of their staff, students, and their wider community. This stands at odds with the Departmental assumption that improvement is achievable with the same, scalable “support” in all instances, and that, above all, it must result in universal outcomes that are quantitatively measurable.

The perceived unsuitability of targets, in combination with a lack of negotiation or consultation at the school level about what appropriate targets might be, led school leaders to conclude that there was no meaningful process of determination behind them. Being held accountable for the achievement of targets that were not developed with local knowledge or consultation of their schools presents another instance where school leaders have been excluded from the conceptual conversation around what success looks like in their own school. Furthermore, the lack of information provided to them about how their school performance is really being assessed functions as a mechanism of control over their work through which the Department of Education can avoid reciprocal accountability: if these processes remain obscured, it becomes more difficult for school leaders to query their effectiveness, or, indeed, their value.

8.3.2 Lack of transparency around the temporary-to-permanent staffing initiative

The selective release of information was also used to exercise control over school leaders during the implementation of a Departmental response to the state-wide staffing shortage. In 2023, the Department committed to offering permanent positions to any teacher that had been working in a school on a temporary contract for three years or more. P2 recalled thinking it was a “great initiative”, especially because, like many schools, they employed a significant number of teachers in a temporary capacity to substitute unfilled vacancies. In addition, they utilised their equity funding to employ additional teachers and student learning support officers, none of which are included in their standard staffing entitlement, to meet their staffing and support needs. P2 referred

to these people as “*our* people — people with relationships to our staff and students, who would love to work for us, who would love permanent jobs. The bit that I didn’t understand was...who’s paying for it? So I started asking questions.”

P2 detailed a process of having been drip-fed information from the Department, only being able to piece together separate items of information over time. It was not until she had undergone the process of verifying which teachers were eligible —a manual process that schools had to undertake themselves— and confirmed that these staff wanted to be made permanent, initiating the offer from the Department, that she was made fully aware of the answer to her question: “it was *us*. We were paying for it. Out of our own money.” (P2).

“We had 24 temporary staff offered permanency, not all of them full time, but the bottom line of it is that we ended up being 17 bodies above our staffing entitlement, so our school funding has to pay for the full-time employment of 17 bodies distributed across 24 people. The Department is saying how wonderful they are for making all of these people permanent: well, they’ve made them permanent on our own money. We have no money left to spend on anything else. We’d happily have all of these people, we don’t want to get rid of any of them, but from the bucket of money given to us to run our school, because the Department made them permanent on *our* budget, we have hardly anything left. We *have* to pay for these salaries, we have no choice, and now I’m in meetings trying to work out if I can scrounge together enough money to continue running our English support program for Year 8s.” (P2).

Further compounding this is the risk that P2's school will no longer be able to afford to pay for all 24 of these staff, as a school's funding is recalculated annually, and fluctuates with the variables in schools for which funding is received — such as enrolment numbers. As they are now permanent staff of the NSW Department of Education, in the event that the school can no longer afford to employ them, they will be “shipped out” (P2) through the process of central allocation. These staff are also unable to apply for any permanent vacancies that arise in future, which schools would not need to use their discretionary funding for, as the salaries of permanent positions within the staffing entitlement are automatically funded by the Department each year. This places additional decision-making stress on school leaders such as P2, and other schools in similar positions, who have no choice but to fund these positions with their discretionary funding at the cost of other programs and initiatives within the school. Rather than feeling supported by the Department, the outcome of this initiative left P2 feeling that her school was in competition with it: “We lose because we're paying for these people, and we lose because we can't engage anybody with this money...and the Department's winning. They're winning because they're saving all this money, and they look like they have done something constructive to address the staffing shortage. Sceptical, I am!” (P2).

This obfuscation by the Department is, in the first instance, an example of the way that the state has deliberately withheld information from school leaders to elicit their participation in an initiative they would otherwise have objected to. In addition, however, it is a further example of how control over education policy is used as a

political tool. As P2 explains, the most apparent objective driving this initiative was not to sincerely honour school leaders' need to make temporary staff in their schools permanent. Instead, it was to publicly appear as if political action had been taken to address the state-wide staffing shortage. In doing so, the Department prioritised its own image over the genuine needs of schools, as school leaders like P2 were unknowingly coerced into committing their discretionary equity funding to employing staff above their allocated entitlement.

8.3.3 Denial of the state-wide staffing shortage

A lack of transparency around information was also raised by interviewees for whom this problem extended to the denial of system-wide challenges, a denial they felt was a mechanism for abrogating the commitment of the Department to central support. Until late 2022, the Department and the state government more generally engaged in the long term, public denial of poor working conditions in schools, particularly as a result of the staffing shortage (Longmuir and Phillips, 2022). This left school leaders with no choice but to do their best to address the consequences of the shortage at the local level. This was not met by any state effort to address the structural issues leading to high turnover and decreasing rates of attraction to the profession.

One school leader encountered this denial directly when seeking urgent support from the Department's staffing directorate:

I would ring Staffing and tell them I needed an English teacher urgently, and they would tell me that was no problem, they had 35 English teachers...and [when they failed to provide me with one] I even asked them for these teachers' contact details so that I could try to convince them to come to my school, but they wouldn't give them to me...because there were no 35 teachers. They denied there was a staffing shortage because [I can only assume] that's what they were told to do by the government. (P23).

Refusing to acknowledge the very existence of the shortage meant that the responsibility to workshop difficult staffing solutions in schools fell solely to school leaders. Despite the commitments of the School Success Model to a shared accountability for education delivery, and the nature of the staffing shortage as a structural problem out of the hands of schools themselves, sufficient system support was not provided. The refusal of the state to recognise the issues faced in schools arguably amounts to a form of subjective control. It created a setting in which school leaders continued to perform the work of making vital resource allocation decisions when severely understaffed, while the value of this extremely complex and challenging work could also remain unrecognised.

8.3.4 *The separation of conception from execution in school leaders' work*

A universal finding amongst school leaders was the sense that their feedback on education policy and conditions in schools is not sincerely received or addressed by the Department. When discussing this, several school leaders recalled being told directly by the then Secretary of Education, that: “there are no pathways up into the Department for principals, we want you in schools” (P17). This emphasised to school leaders what they know from their experience of work to be true: that there is a sharp division between the “corporate” control centre of the Department of Education, and the school leaders and staff on the ground in classrooms. They “do not feel like one education system” (P1). This divide resembles the separation of conception from execution predicted by Braverman in original labour process theory (1978) and posited by early labour process analyses of education work (Lawn and Ozga, 1988).

Some participants discussed a distinct lack of awareness amongst those with decision making power in the Department regarding conditions in schools:

Even when you're putting forward suggestions on how things can be improved, it's a black hole you're talking to, and there seems to be a gap between Directors and Executive Directors, and Executive Directors and the Secretary of Education...information is not getting through. You're on your own. You hear from the top echelons of the Department and [what they say seems to indicate] they are protected from what reality is like at the school level. (P21)

This perception of a lack of awareness encompassed Departmentally driven initiatives, such as ‘state-wide staffrooms’: virtual forums developed for use during the COVID-19 pandemic where resources and support were made virtually available to teachers: “I’ve heard people in senior positions in the Department talk about things like the state-wide staffrooms, and [it’s clear] they don’t have any idea about them, I can hear in the way they talk about it that they’ve never actually been in one” (P6).

P31, in their literacy lead role, offered insight into the divide between work in schools and work in the Department itself, often referred to by internal employees as “corporate”. The literacy lead role was created to provide the support for schools promised by the School Success Model, but when asked about what their job entailed, P31 described it as a “bullshit job — I can’t [explain simply] what it actually is”. While explaining that their “opinion of corporate was [already] quite low [when I worked in schools]” P31 took on a role within the “corporate” arm of the Department because they “needed a break” after working for many years in a school with severe social challenges and behavioural issues. Distinguishing themselves from many people in the Department, made the point that they “still have [their] school hat on”. This is not the case for the many “corporate” employees, who may not have worked in schools for many years, for very long even when they did, if at all.

What schools need, what teachers need, it’s not front of mind [for many Departmental workers]— it’s not even back of mind. They go into schools with this

thought process of ‘I’m going to tell you what you need to do’. Where the hell are you coming from that you think that’s the right thing to do? These people are drowning. You [a support specialist] should go in there and you should be saying, what do you need from me? Take whatever you can and want from me, and I’ll shift whatever I’m doing to meet your needs. Whereas, most people go in there and say ‘we’re not doing that, we’re not doing that’ [gesturing to signal refusal to do tasks requested by the school]. (P31)

The divide exemplifies the separation of conception from execution in the system, with P31 explaining that discussions of work in schools within the Department frequently make use of “us” and “them” language. Strategy and decision making takes place from within the “corporate” arm of the Department, and those who work in schools are simply expected to enact these decisions.

P31 also shared that several of their senior colleagues refer to school leaders as “lifers”, reflecting the belief that it is a professional shortcoming to spend an entire career working in schools rather than ascending to a bureaucratic position within the Department. This suggests a wilful alienation from the reality of conditions within schools — perhaps making it easier to attribute systemic problems, such as the staffing shortage, to poor local management. As P31 surmised, “if you insist principals are just incompetent, you can keep pulling the wool over your eyes”.

“Corporate” advisory roles within the Department, such as P31’s literacy lead role, are also underscored by the assumption that areas of poor performance in schools can be addressed by capacity building or professional development seminars. While P31 acknowledged that sometimes this is the case, the programs designed to be implemented in schools require “a lot of adapting”, and P31 stressed that they were not trained in how to tailor programs to the specific needs of a school. P31 attributes their skill at this task to their 25+ years of experience working in schools, and commented that without that experience, it would be impossible to “do the job [in a way that benefits the school]. How can someone who has never been in a school determine what a school needs? How can you determine something is right for all schools?”.

A cluster of schools in which P31 has worked and built rapport with proposed that they combine their equity funding to constitute a salary equivalent to P31’s current role to employ P31 to service their schools — essentially, to continue the same work they had been doing instead of being reallocated to other schools. When P31 brought this request to the Department, they were told that if they worked for this cluster of schools instead of ‘corporate’, they would no longer have access to the high-quality resources prepared within the Department to support the execution of the role — “I need those resources to do the job”. On the basis of this, it was ultimately decided they would not take on this role.

P31 also commented on the privileges of their working conditions, explaining that they are paid at the level of a deputy principal but “don’t work anywhere nearly as hard”.

Scoffing, and with a degree of shame, they explained that they are allocated one hour a fortnight of “reflective time”, simply to think about how they are performing in their role. This time did not need to be accounted for. Contrasting this to principal workload, P31 asserted that it’s “hard to believe we have the same employer— I’m treated like a professional...but if I worked in a school [I wouldn’t be]”.

This provides interesting and significant evidence of the processes by which conceptual, or key decision-making work, has been strategically separated from its execution, or implementation, in schools — work looks drastically different, and more comfortable, from inside the Departmental bureaucracy. The Department appears to be lacking even a “basic understanding of principal workload”, as reflected in the expectation that principals were to attend series of three-hour professional development seminars delivered by P31 and others in similar roles. In reference to the teachers who do sit through those seminars, a deep irony of pedagogical oversight is evident: “no one can concentrate for that long anyway”.

The organisational separation between the bureaucratic arm of the Department, and school leaders and their staff, also functions as a mechanism of control through its power to make unilateral decisions around resource allocation in both components of this system. Cost saving measures in the Department were understood by school leaders to be disproportionately directed at schools. Frustration emerged at the apparent impact of this on the labour process of school leaders, which has led to the further intensification of their work:

All the director's positions: if you look at the organisational structure from the top down and out [motioning a pyramid shape], there's got to be a director for toilet paper. I'm not talking about the Directors of Educational Leadership that work with principals and schools directly. I'm talking about people who never see the light of day in a school. There's big bucks at the top there. They're worried about deputy principals teaching more classes to lighten the load or the burden on the system...versus all the money we're losing at the top. And what do they do for schools? They're trying to scrape off the money down below, here at the coalface, but the positions up there in the Department [bureaucracy] stay the same. (P2)

Accountable for achieving unrealistic, system-imposed targets, school leaders are tasked with delivering the same standard of education while managing the consequences of reduced resources, including a dwindling and increasingly burnt-out workforce. P2 referenced the necessity for deputy principals, who are typically relieved of most or all of their teaching duties to undertake leadership responsibilities, to teach classes in response to the teacher shortage. While the capacity for deputy principals to take on teaching differs in every school, in many schools —such as P2's— their workload as school leaders already exceeds the limits of a regular working week. Moreover, even principals of large metropolitan schools, such as P12, P16 and P28, reported the need for them to take on class teaching responsibilities, or supervising students at break times. Their separate responsibilities as school leaders must still be met, leading to the extraction of even further labour without any additional cost to the Department itself. It falls to schools to address these resource gaps without adequate

support, while no reciprocal mechanism exists by which school leaders can question or influence the way resources are distributed in the bureaucratic arm of the Department.

The scepticism around the value provided by Departmental positions was corroborated by P31, Lead Specialist in Secondary Literacy, working in such a position: “I’m getting paid at deputy principal level, and my boss is at principal level. There’s no way that I work as hard as *any* deputy principal in *any* school, but if I was to say that in any [Departmental] meeting —and I have— people would shout me down like there’s no tomorrow.” This perspective suggests more than simply a disparity in compensation: it provides evidence of an entrenched culture within the bureaucracy that regards work in schools as less valuable. Efforts to continuously reproduce this culture contribute to the exclusion of school leaders from decision making that affects their work, further consolidating the control of the bureaucratic centre over schools and their local expertise.

The separation of the decision-making arm of the Department from school leaders also extends to the maintenance of close control over the conceptual resources used to deliver support under the School Success Model.

P31 expressed confusion around the stipulation that the professional learning materials provided to them by the Department could not be left in the hands of schools under any circumstances:

We are specifically told *not* to give these professional learning materials to the schools. I don't understand why. I hope it's not this, it's a bit cynical of me, but I think maybe it's because [the Department] think... if we just give this material to the schools, who needs us? (P31)

While the investigatory scope of this thesis could not determine the rationale behind this refusal to disseminate professional learning resources, P31 offered further comment on the practice: "I don't understand why you wouldn't just give those resources to schools directly. It's almost like they're afraid that if you put these in the hands of teachers, then...they won't need us [corporate] anymore". P31 continues to be deployed to different schools, unable to make the sustained difference that would have been possible if they could solely service the network of schools that collaborated to try and employ them. This opposes the efficacy of the ostensibly scalable, lean support driven by the School Success Model, where resources aim to service many schools on a short term, temporary basis.

Referring to the "catch phrase" often used within the Department that you "must not stray from the evidence base", P31 emphasised that professional learning resources are updated approximately every six months, and that there appears to be a focus on ensuring that all Departmental resources are well supported by research and proven to be effective. Nevertheless, P31 suggested that "if there are practices that can't, for

whatever reason, be considered part of the ‘evidence base’, you should still be able to give them to schools. They can determine whether it’s useful or not in their classrooms.”

This sentiment calls for confidence in the capability of school leaders and teachers, and a realistic engagement with the inalienable autonomy inherent to their labour process — teachers are, after all, ultimately in control of how any class is delivered. School leaders represent the local sum of this contemporaneous act, as they spearhead the pedagogical approach required to meet the needs of their specific student body. Despite the legitimacy of concerns around efficacy that a centralised system as large as the NSW Department of Education may have in practice, P31 highlights that control over conceptual resources remains concentrated within the bureaucracy, and deliberately kept out of schools. If schools were in possession of these resources, then their leaders would be free to draw upon them when constructing an approach to professional learning that not only accounts for the needs of students, but of staff, too. Instead, by withholding these resources and prohibiting their modification, the status quo sees efforts directed from the centre towards the further separation of conceptual work from its execution.

8.4 “Support” for “school success”: entrenching further separation

Recalling the assumptions of scalability that underpin its policy approach detailed in Chapter 5, the School Success Model has exacerbated the separation between the Department as a decision-making control centre with conceptual resources, and schools

as merely the site of service execution and delivery. This functions as a control mechanism through its attempt to produce cost efficiencies within a system that is already cannibalising itself.

P31 described successful syllabus programming as fundamentally reliant on long term relationships with staff to support their professional development, and an understanding of the individual capabilities and learning needs of every class: resources that both require local, embedded knowledge rather than just externally imposed prescriptions about how to improve teaching.

What most people will do is create their programs off the syllabus, but the real determining factor [for a successful teaching program] is to start with what the kids can do or not do. Here's the syllabus, and here are the kids and what they can and can't do. I create a program, a sequence of teaching lessons, that has to connect the syllabus to what the kids actually need. If kids are at a stage three level, programming for stage four [when they are not ready] is ridiculous. (P31).

The approach of installing specialists in schools on a short term basis to support them to achieve their targets was found to reproduce a sense of support resources as being, in the words of P31, "big and mysterious". This stands in contrast to P31's understanding of what produced truly successful outcomes for schools in their specialist support role, which was to demystify the technical language of the resources provided by the Department. Despite acknowledging the value of the support resources for their

consolidation of research into pedagogical best practice, achieving progress in schools still came down to “taking it out of this academic space, and putting it into classroom-speak; putting it into what-does-this-kid-need language” (P31). Effective support, as P31 repeatedly emphasised, was not just grounded in technical knowledge, but an understanding of how and when to modify, adapt, and even abandon elements of these resources — decisions they described as requiring “bravery”. Ultimately, P31 was professionally developing teachers to construct a syllabus program that suited the specific needs of their students — a skill acquired through experience, and subsequent confidence, in their own expertise as educators. This approach to professional development resembles the adage of teaching someone to fish, so that they might eat for a lifetime, rather than giving them a fish, which might only allow them to eat for a day.

Given the external, imposed approach to this role that P31 strongly felt was preferred by the Department (involving the presentation of ‘outside’ knowledge to an audience of teachers), the School Success Model’s notion of support resembles a kind of conceptual gatekeeping around academic research and contemporary best practice in education. Even when the claimed intent is to better equip teachers to improve the educational outcomes of their students, which implies the sharing of knowledge, the firsthand experience of P31 suggests that this knowledge is incapable of creating progress if it not delivered in a way that foregrounds the local expertise in a school.

Rather than the notion of an interchangeable, universally scalable best practice at the centre of the School Success Model, interviews with school leaders suggest that it is the

unique understanding staff possess of student needs that facilitates genuine student progress. Facilitating this would require the state to relinquish some control in order to support the autonomy of teachers in classrooms, and the delivery of educational leadership at the local level. Control over the labour process of school leaders through their exclusion from decision-making over their own work tightly maintains the power of the state over cost rationalisation, even allowing the state to stand by as the resource-starved education system begins to collapse. It is clear that this control has come at the cost of student-focused education delivery and the wellbeing of school leaders and staff.

8.5 The positionality of language as a mechanism to reinforce exploitative power structures

Within the culture of the Department, established language norms serve to reinforce the exploitative concept that the Departmental bureaucracy holds power and superiority over schools. When school leaders discussed their working relationship with the state, or the place of their schools within the public education system, a particular positionality emerged. When referring to the role of the Department in key decision-making processes, such as policy change, the innovation of the curriculum or the regulation of standards, school leaders referred to the Department as being “above” them — the Department is making decisions at the “top”, or “up there”. Systemic “pressures come from the top down” (P3); they are imposed from above, rather than received or developed laterally. Sometimes, the Department was referred to as the

“centre”, but typically this language was selected when discussing the distribution of resources. Funding was described as being allocated from the centre, a process by which it ended up in “buckets” (P1) or “pools” (P7) of money at the local site of the school.

There is a deep-rooted sense that schools, despite delivering the very service of education at the core of the entire Department, are positioned *below* both the state bureaucracy and the state government in a deeply hierarchical power structure. This might be explained by the fact that the government itself ultimately retains the highest level of authority in decision making within a public system. It might also be explained by the reality that the next hierarchical position outside of schools and ‘above’ principals is the role of Directors — their network level supervisors. However, many roles exist in the Department that are adjacent to roles in schools — support roles, administrative roles, project management roles for example— that service the delivery of education and often require no experience in schools or education at all. While political authority sits within the “corporate” arm — the notion of the bureaucracy as “corporate” being another conceptualisation of their purpose— they support, rather than dictate, the delivery of education. The experiences of school leaders in this study alone are testimony enough to the fact that no matter what control mechanisms preside over work in schools, school leaders and their teachers ultimately deliver education in classrooms with a degree of autonomy that cannot truly be eliminated.

The separation of schools from Departmental decision-making processes perpetuates the sense of “secret squirrel business” (P31) in the bureaucracy, with much information remaining unknown or inaccessible to school leaders. Beyond understanding, and therefore beyond critique, the language of school leaders reveals the belief that the Department is spatially and hierarchically dominant over schools.

8.6 Selective autonomy: when the state relinquishes control for its own benefit

The elements of school leaders’ work discussed throughout this chapter that are explicitly constrained by the state clearly show how the mechanisms of control in the labour process are perceived by school leaders. However, in addition to this, circumstances in which control has been strategically withdrawn —such as the COVID-19 pandemic— confirm the capacity of the public education system to better support the local autonomy of school leaders. Furthermore, the novel challenges that arose in the pandemic setting required highly specialised solutions at the school level. This stands in contrast to the approach of the School Success Model, which seeks *universally* to impose Departmentally conceived notions of best practice and decentres local expertise.

As in many sectors and areas of work, the COVID-19 pandemic placed unprecedented pressure on organisations, managers and workers. At both the Departmental and local level, challenges arose as schools were required to comply with state and federal health directives while continuing the provision of education to students and protecting the

wellbeing of staff. As discussed in Chapter 6, this led to the intensification of work for all staff in schools, and placed school leaders at the forefront of coordinating a pandemic response that would meet the specific needs of their schools. In identifying the challenges in their own work, school leaders mentioned that all work was underscored by a constantly changing barrage of information. Not only did they need to ensure that they themselves understood the dynamic expectations upon schools, but that their staff did too: “there was a mountain of information coming out, and that was tough. My job was to put it into a format the staff could digest. It was very important they had access to that information” (P19).

The challenges of this period manifested differently in all schools, with the differences in needs between every school community heightened by the spatial disparity in the pandemic’s impact. This magnified the need for a bespoke response in each school. Some schools, already facing the challenges of catering to students who were bound to their homes in vastly different domestic circumstances and with different access to resources, were also contending with tighter lockdown restrictions as they varied by local government area. In response to the highly diverse needs of students, school leaders all reported different initiatives that were implemented in their schools, such as assigning every teacher in the school an allocation of students to conduct more frequent wellbeing checks (P2), sourcing devices to loan to students (P33), or organising take home curriculum packs for households without internet connectivity or appropriate devices for online learning (P3, P23, P27). Adjustments to the curriculum were also frequently reported: school leaders grappled with what degree of learning was possible for some students and year groups, and strategies for ensuring that students

undergoing their final exams were prioritised and facilitated to complete them with as much support as possible.

The challenges in managing staff were just as variable: schools had to remain open for the children of essential workers, and school leaders were tasked with managing how to oversee a hybrid workforce: teachers working from home, teachers unable to work due to illness or caretaking responsibilities, and some teachers inevitably required to work on site. These challenges were immense — as one school leader put it, “COVID nearly killed us” (P22).

A distinguishing feature of this time was that in devising solutions to these challenges, school leaders felt they were genuinely able to exercise control over local decision making in the best interests of their school: “during COVID, the Department kept saying you just have to make a decision, and we’ll back you. This [support] is *missing* from regular work. We had that freedom for 16 weeks – and then they pulled it all back” (P18). This contrasts starkly with the conditions of work for school leaders after returning to the regular service of school post-pandemic. Principals were trusted with the responsibility of navigating a crisis. Now, as P18 explained, “the assumption is that we don’t know how to do our jobs.

The state’s decision to relinquish control during the most challenging circumstances faced by the public education system in recorded history is a testament to the pragmatic reality of school management. In a crisis, with the local needs of schools at their most

amplified, the centre was unable to provide adequate support. This limitation brings into sharper relief what remains true even during the most average day in a school: that a tension always exists between one-size-fits-all state-imposed control and the needs of staff and students in a particular school community. This tension characterises the labour process of public school leaders, who are ultimately responsible for making decisions in the best interests of their schools even if, and when, these decisions are not positively facilitated by the state.

8.7 Conclusion

Together, Chapters 7 and 8 have identified a wide-ranging combination of routine and structural mechanisms of control evident in the labour process of school leaders under the School Success Model policy period. These control mechanisms support the long term decimation of resources in the education system, allowing the state to deflect accountability for working conditions while facilitating the use of education policy as a political tool.

In the pursuit of neoliberal ideals of 'efficiency', many of these control mechanisms directly enable the state to closely rationalise the cost of public education. Beginning with the intensification and degradation of their work, the state extracts a continuously growing volume of labour from school leaders while neglecting to provide them with additional resources. In servicing the administrative and reporting requirements of the state, the nature of school leaders' work has undergone a process of degradation,

leaving less time for the conceptual work of educational leadership and reducing the scope for leaders to innovate in their local contexts. The experiences of school leaders reported in these chapters demonstrate that the state has driven change at all levels. It has heightened conformity amongst school leadership through an increasingly prescriptive policy scaffold and the quantification of performance management, ensuring the education system continues to function at the lowest cost possible despite a high rate of turnover, and its failure to improve resourcing and working conditions.

Following this, the state employs mechanisms of control to further shift and deflect accountability for systemic issues. Through the manipulation of data collection, a lack of information transparency, and the separation of decision-making in the Departmental bureaucracy from school leaders at the chalk face, the state has abrogated its responsibility for complex structural issues such as the state-wide staffing shortage. Avenues for true accountability have been eroded through deeply enforced power structures, particularly as the state has loudly committed to providing support through policy reform while actively neglecting to provide it. Finally, the state exercises control in order to wield education policy as a political tool to gain public favour — in particular through rewarding narrow ideas of educational success, and devising initiatives that only appear to address systemic issues.

As a theoretical lens, labour process theory has allowed the full elucidation of the features of school leaders' work that intensify the exploitation of their labour. The nature of, and driving motivation behind, these control mechanisms is political, and

cannot be properly understood without explicitly accounting for their situation in a neoliberal political and economic policy context. Despite their subjectively conceived position 'below' the Departmental bureaucracy, school leaders sit firmly at the centre of an increasingly under-resourced public service, stretching the limbs of their educational leadership to deliver the best education they can to their local communities.

CHAPTER NINE: RESISTANCE IN THE LABOUR PROCESS OF SCHOOL LEADERS

9.1 Introduction

Control mechanisms in the labour process of school leaders reveal the consequences, inadvertent or otherwise, of the ways in which the work of public education is shaped by the interests of the state. However, school leaders, and the staff who work in their schools, are not simply passive subjects of the forces that dictate the terms upon which education is to be delivered. This chapter answers the third research question of this thesis, presenting evidence that school leaders engage in resistance against these control mechanisms, and that, further to this, resistance to the conditions of work imposed upon them forms a critical component of their labour process. The ways in which school leaders resist directives and create the conditions for staff within their schools to do the same are discussed. Thematically, resistance is identified as being enacted in the interests of what school leaders believe to be the true purpose of their own work, as well as in the interests of their staff, or the interests of their students. This means that for the participants of this study, resistance to control often constitutes the work itself. As was discussed in Chapter 3, this bears similarity to the subjects of Baines' (2023) and Baines, Brown and Cabahug's (2024) research in the health and community care sectors.

9.2 The resistance is the work: divergent views about the purpose of school leadership

Resistance amongst school leaders to the School Success Model, the broader policy that surrounds and interacts with it, and instructions from their Directors, suggest that, in some ways, what principals view to be the purpose of their roles diverges from the purpose that is implicit in the expectations of them set by the Department of Education.

This divergence drives school leaders to constantly negotiate between the impetus to act in alignment with the terms of their employer and the initiative to act in alignment with their own purpose. It was frequently emphasised in interviews that school leaders view their core work as being based on the social development of the 'whole' student, rather than their academic performance alone, or their academic performance according to the narrow metrics used to measure their results.

The School Success Model has taken so much of the joy out of why I became a principal. If you actually look at the scale of improvement, it's 0.3 [hyperbole] of a difference in NAPLAN results that they're using to place judgements on someone's effectiveness. That's not a measure of teaching and learning and building great young people. The one reason we [educators] came into this work is because we build people, we don't set out to create a system based on passing tests. (P9)

As the above school leader points out, the elevation of student performance in standardised tests such as NAPLAN as one of the primary means of measuring “school success” not only runs antithetical to their driving motivation for undertaking a leadership role, but for becoming a teacher in the first place. Quantitative metrics are unable to capture a great deal of the work involved in supporting a student through their entire education — the metrics of ‘School Success’ nominated by the Department render it impossible to measure this work from the outset. Neither are they able to capture the relative nature of improvement for each student: “what looks like nothing on paper could have been the result of years of effort for one student” (P1).

Nevertheless, school leaders’ priorities remain the same: not one participant interviewed for this research indicated that their view of “school success”, nor what school leaders perceived to be their true purpose, was reflected fully in the targets developed by the Department of Education. They remain universally interested in making a positive difference to students — an outcome that will look different for every student, and requires a close understanding of their specific needs as an individual within their own context. This is exemplified by the way that examples of resistance in their work often seem to be about letting “procedure suffer” to prioritise “what’s actually happening in the school” (P16).

Evidence from studies of education work in the USA show that over a period of thirty years, the implementation of quantitative performance assessment and numbers-driven accountability for teachers eventually led to a major shift in the way teachers understood themselves and their work (Holloway and Brass, 2018). While teachers initially viewed these mechanisms of evaluation as failing to capture the full scope of

their work and impinging on their professional autonomy, several decades later, studies found that teachers framed these quantitative measures of their performance as the primary way through which they evaluated the quality of their own teaching (Holloway and Brass, 2018). In a reform climate that is increasingly quantifying school and staff performance, and is actively narrowing ideas of success for school leaders according to what can be measured quantitatively, how school leaders in NSW are choosing to resist this process is significant. This suggests that they still seek to achieve outcomes for their schools outside of the targets and goals by which their own work is evaluated.

9.3 The resistance is the work: culture creates the conditions for resistance

On the existence of these divergent views about the purpose of education work, one school leader commented that “it’s like I’m doing two jobs — everything the Department expects me to do, administration, targets...and then all the actual work” (P1). It seems that any discussion of resistance to control exercised over or upon a school, or the work of school leadership itself, must begin with the acknowledgement of this fundamental reality. For what goes on at the local site to differ from central directives, conditions must be created from the top down: school leaders play an instrumental role in the facilitation of what resistance can occur. In the view of P3, “the role of a head teacher [and all executive positions above them] is really to actively create the culture of the school.”

The experiences of participants interviewed for this thesis repeatedly emphasised the importance of the culture within a school, not only for its direct impact on student performance, but also for its permeating capacity to determine the quality of working relationships between staff, the quality of teaching and assessment itself, and the ability of staff to withstand challenges in their work.

For school leaders themselves, turning up to continuously face the challenges of work in under-resourced schools was recognised as enough to constitute resistance. One school leader mentioned that she was constantly fighting against obstacles, explaining that her job was like being attacked in a video game simulation all day: “the resistance is just being here. It’s maintaining your optimism, energy and commitment in the face of every obstacle constantly being cast at you. And you just keep doing it. With a smile on your face. Year after year.” (P3). P19 clarified that “even a good day is hard work.”

The challenges to wellbeing presented simply by working in public schools in NSW extends wholly and universally to staff, and school culture has the potential to moderate the burden of this work through resistant practices. During the COVID-19 pandemic, several principals, including P1, P11, P12, P15, P18, P22, P35 reported the way they deliberately increased the amount of communication with their staff in the forms of weekly or daily newsletters. To some extent this was compelled by managerial necessity, as principals often found themselves needing to ensure all staff were up to date with the constantly evolving restrictions that applied to their schools and communities. However, all principals explained their decision to put effort into

connecting with their staff via this increased frequency of communication as an intentional means of fostering connectivity and wellbeing. Faced with the immediate challenges of a sharply intensified workload as they taught remotely in addition to the difficulties of isolation and lockdown, principals in particular were aware of the intensification of work staff in schools were being required to perform, and the disproportionate lack of support, reward or recognition available for this work. Ultimately, it was connecting in a human way that staff appreciated most: “I got a lot of engagement and responses back from my staff when I talked about how I was feeling [not just about work]” (P19).

P11, together with their deputy principals, organised an end of term barbecue for staff at which they handed every teacher a personalised card thanking them for every way in which they had individually gone “above and beyond” that year: “many of them cried, everyone was so strung out. [The barbecue] was the only thing that got us to the end of the year”. In the absence of formal recognition or metrics that register the completion of labour outside the performance targets centred by the Department of Education, constructing ways to acknowledge the existence of this work is the foremost step required for resisting its erasure. The actions of writing extra, feelings-forward newsletters or taking the time to organise barbecues may not appear to constitute misbehaviour or resistance in and of themselves, but they provide an important example of the ways in which school leaders engage in additional labour to consistently produce conditions in which resistance can take place.

The development and upkeep of a culture of resistance within a school, or, by the same token, the absence of one, is also highly dependent on the individual leadership of the principal. When asked about resistance to policies they did not agree with or that were inhibiting them, P23, a deputy principal, clarified that they had “absolutely no voice to resist [on their own]” because anything they did could potentially undermine or threaten the standing of the principal. They conceptualised their school as a chess board, where they have to “protect the king”, the king being the principal, and that as a result of this, they felt emboldened only to resist in ways they were led to by their principal.

This suggests that within the executive leadership team, school leaders do not possess equal capabilities to resist, or that the difference in potential consequences for resistance is variable between school leaders. As P1 and P22 emphasised, the way work is organised under the devolved power structure first introduced by Local Schools, Local Decisions still sees accountability concentrated heavily in the principal. In their position, the “buck stops with them” (P22) and “no one else can be held ultimately responsible for whatever happens in the school” (P1). This has two implications: first, that principals are putting their professional standing on the line when engaging in resistance on behalf of their school, or when they allow practices of resistance to occur within their schools. Counter to this, it reveals how significantly the capacity to resist within a school may be reliant on the principal: in the absence of a will to resist possessed by the principal, other school leaders may feel they cannot resist at all.

A form of resistance exclusive to principals involved the utilisation of school funding.

To protect staff in the wake of the IER policy changes, P1 devised a solution to ensure that both staff and students would be protected from students with disruptive behavioural issues:

Because of the IER, we've come up with the idea to timetable a 'reflection room'. Even though the policy ended up being not as bad as originally proposed, we did have to create a reflection room where we put all the kids who have misbehaved and can't be in class because they have done something bad. It's for kids that we can't send home on a suspension, but we can't possibly have them in class. We might reduce the number of suspensions on paper but those kids are withdrawn from class and they are in trouble. But someone has to be timetabled on to that. You've only got a certain number of teachers allocated to your school to meet the needs of the school. We have a staffing shortage. Suddenly we need to find a teacher to supervise this and we have to pay for that. (P1)

P1 framed the creation of a reflection room as resistance as she felt it met the Department's intended objective "on paper", referring to a technical reduction in suspensions, but was still withdrawing these students from class — effectively mimicking a suspension. Despite this, P1 still needed to forego discretionary equity funding to fund the supervision of the reflection room. Just as school leaders work to create conditions for resistance, so do they use the funds available to schools to protect them from the anticipated harmful consequences of policy reform.

The effort many school leaders make to carry out what they view as the core purpose of their work, or their 'second job', usually requires doing *more* than what is expected of them. Ultimately, this points towards the paradox that underscores school leaders' wage effort bargain. The degree to which they are controlled by the Department of Education is the very mechanism that leads them to go above and beyond in their roles, engaging in resistance to achieve what they believe to be the best outcomes for their schools. It would be less effort to work to rule and to do just as they are asked. Instead, in many instances, their acts of misbehaviour and their resistance against the changing nature of their work is leading them to work longer and harder, and thus leading to the maximal extraction of their labour. School leaders continue to do more with less, and their resistance creates the most economically efficient outcome for the state.

9.4 The resistance is the work: school leadership as a 'filter'

School initiatives in the NSW Public Education system, ranging from those that support the curriculum, teaching and assessment, wellbeing and professional development, were described as being immense in volume, "ever changing" and "impossible to keep up with" (P1). This was understood by P6 as being a function of political influence, "what the State government decides is important at any one time", and the vision of those in senior Departmental roles: "whenever someone new is put in a role in 'corporate', they feel they need to make their mark" (P6).

In direct contrast to this, P1, P2, P3, P4 and P6 viewed a central strength of their school culture as being a refusal to take on “fads”: “if we implement something, it is slowly, with great support. It must be well researched, good quality with literature behind it, or else we don’t touch it. It won’t stick” (P2). At this school, a refusal to deviate from the Quality Teaching Framework—a literature-backed approach to teaching that involves critical reflection that was introduced in 2008 (NSW Department of Education, 2008)—was cited as a key example of this ethos: “if we keep taking more on all the time, we can’t dedicate enough time and energy to getting what works right” (P6).

P2 invoked the metaphor that to be a school leader, and even more particularly, to be a principal, is to act as a “filter” that is positioned between the staff in their schools and the Department of Education:

We need to be the filter. We have to pick and choose, or else we will overwhelm the staff. If we keep pushing more and more on them...they become overwhelmed, and we move away from the idea that they are unique and they work hard. It’s something special that needs to be honoured and preserved (P2).

To clarify, the Department of Education does not expect that school leaders “pick and choose” initiatives: refusing to adopt particular initiatives is a form of deliberate resistance. In the view of these school leaders, resistance against the short term, constantly changing slew of initiatives introduced by the Department does not only prevent the quality of teaching in the school being compromised, it also actively

prevents the degradation of staff morale they feel would occur if this volume of directives were not “filtered”.

In another case, P2 referred to a recent instance where they declined to put forward selected staff for a ‘middle leadership’ professional development program, after having sent staff to a similar program a few months earlier, because “we would be sending the same people to learn the same content,” and this would have put undue pressure on them to complete both the development program and the responsibilities of their roles due to the length of time required.

Principals also act as a filter when it comes to their own work: around half of the school leaders interviewed mentioned that they have selectively refused to attend Department mandated training sessions or professional development workshops because they are “a waste of time, and assume we don’t know how to do our jobs” or “that we can be taught how to do our jobs by internet modules”. This was particularly pronounced during COVID, when school leaders had to de-prioritise meetings with their Directors and professional development, in order to handle the volume of work necessitated by crisis management.

9.5 Resistance in the interests of staff

School leaders also resist control mechanisms in the interests of their staff, and to support the operational needs of the school. This commonly resembled circumventing or flouting administrative requirements in favour of prioritising the needs of staff, for example, “ticking staff development boxes in order to save time to actually take a relational approach to development” (P16).

There are a lot of forms, details to fill out, and prescriptive professional development requirements but we will cut corners with those so we can actually spend time [developing] our staff, we prioritise the conversations over the forms. I think we take care of people’s professional learning in other ways. A forced conversation isn't where our school really develops, we have a more nuanced...better connection with people when we work collaboratively, when we don't need to be doing something to tick it off. (P16)

P11 also described refusing to ask his staff to take on more administrative work in response to new requirements imposed by the Department regarding the ongoing servicing of their school plan: “I’ve made a decision that other initiatives are more important than the school plan, and my staff have appreciated that”.

Other than sick leave, P21 was instructed by their Director to decline any leave requests made by their staff because of the severe staffing-shortage related vacancies at their school. Unable to deny the adverse personal circumstances of many of their staff, especially after the demands of the COVID pandemic on their workload, this participant resisted this instruction and approved all leave requests. They risked great professional consequences to do this, and at the time they gave this interview, they had taken mental health leave themselves — so it remains to be seen what the consequences of such acts of resistance might be for school leaders.

Resistance also appeared against the hyper-competitive performance culture established through the introduction of league tables and narrow targets, considered by P7 to undermine best practice in the profession:

It [success] has just been about if we got the [band] fives and sixes, if we got the marks, then that makes our school look good. And that's something that the Department has put on us. Like with the league tables? Where people have to compete...the MySchools thing. We have to enter that world, that territory, and I hate that. That's just where numbers and data are just surface level, and you can make data say anything. I gained the respect of my principal when I was getting those marks, but before that, I was ignored. That's a worry. It's a huge issue because it becomes this dog-eat-dog world, this competitive world, whereas we are much better placed if we're collegial and collaborative.

In response to this, P7 chooses to resist through the sharing of resources, not only on an individual basis but through the proliferation of a collaborative culture throughout their entire school:

At [our school], we share whatever we create. We don't hide to ourselves even between teachers, or within faculties. Otherwise it would become like...“This is *my* resource, you can't have it!” And why would we keep reinventing the wheel alone? We can keep lifting each other up, especially if we do it together. (P7)

Resistance in the interests of staff was also recorded in more classically recognisable forms. P21 organised formal industrial action amongst the staff at their school on no less than two separate occasions. In response to persistent vacancies on their staff that rendered the school dangerously non-functional, and a complete lack of central support to locate teachers or assist with resource allocation, this school leader organised *two* walkouts. Staff ‘walked’ off the job, leaving school to protest in front of the NSW Industrial Relations Commission. This was neither reported on by the media nor directly addressed by the Department of Education.

Finally, in response to the industrial action, I got some staffing support. After months of trying through all the regular channels, doing everything I could and basically being ignored, this was the only way we could demand some attention...and [what we received] was still inadequate. (P21)

As mentioned earlier, many school leaders push back on the request that they complete training sessions or professional development during school hours, particularly those that are centred around the completion of online modules, which were frequently denounced as insulting their capabilities. In addition, resisting these demands on their time was identified as a form of respect and solidarity for their staff:

The fact I'm expected to give up an entire day to learn about cyber security, or something like that, just suggests to me that there is no real understanding of our workload. I also won't leave my school to go and do something pointless when I know how hard my staff are working. (P27)

School leaders all accompanied their reports of this kind of resistance with comments about the work intensification they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and continue to experience as a result of the staffing shortage. The lack of staff in some schools has left principals and deputy principals with no choice but to defer their leadership responsibilities during school hours to undertake additional work that requires a "body in the room" (P16), from classroom teaching to playground supervision. This resistance demonstrates further that the priorities of school leaders do not always align with what is expected of them by the Department, and that they can and do push back on these expectations in accordance with what they perceive to be most important for their staff and students.

School leaders also acted in the interests of their staff through engaging in further resistance-as-work, developing complex solutions to the specific challenges in their school context. P1 described the coordination of a whole-school effort to address an incoming cohort of students with unusually high learning needs, anticipating that without efforts to “buy” time for their staff, a cascade of workload issues would arise. This dilemma was heightened by the school’s commitment to participate in a professional development program aimed at improving final stage student results:

There just weren’t enough hours in the day for the teachers to do the quite detailed work required for it. The whole point of committing to the HSC Strategy was to improve student results. At the same time, the literacy and numeracy levels of students coming in to our school at year 7 level was increasingly low, so in 2023, all but 8 students entering year 7 were functioning at stage one or two levels of numeracy...that’s early primary. We had to buy time for teachers to do the preparatory work collaboratively so that we could make sure it was happening across the board, which is the holy grail in education: to achieve the same quality of delivery no matter what classroom you walk into, and that comes from people working together, and not being left to their own devices to flounder.

In creating time in the working day for staff to participate in this collaboration, P1 was not motivated by Departmental directives or targets, but a values-driven commitment to delivering the highest quality of education possible for their students — a

commitment which was shared by their staff. P1 integrated the interests of students and staff by supporting teachers with a radically reconfigured timetable:

You try to find the malleable bits, the parts of school operation where you can play around with the length of periods and restructure the day within the confines of what can't change. We found places where we were teaching more hours of science, or we already had extra periods in a subject area or another area, and we found time to allocate to specialised literacy, numeracy and wellbeing periods. We found some extra time for teachers to meet in a formalised way that didn't mean extra hours for them. That is us resisting: despite us saying year after year that the staffing entitlement is not adequate, and teachers need less face-to-face teaching time within their period allocation in order to design effective teaching and learning programs, and mark, and do all the assessing and reporting that's required...we haven't been facilitated any of that structurally. That's why whenever we're frustrated, we look at each other and remind ourselves: "We are the Department." Because no one is coming. We are the ones facing the challenges on the ground and we have to find the solutions. We keep saying these are the things that we need as part of the needs of our role, but we are not given them — so we have to find solutions to make that happen. We have to play around with the resources, find loopholes in policy to get it done.

School leaders' resistance in the interests of staff therefore also involves the undertaking of significant additional labour to address structural challenges beyond

their control. Knowing that they will not receive sufficient support from the system that will address the challenges they face in their individual schools, school leaders innovate around the confines of policy and convention, ensuring that they avoid more severe consequences for their staff in the longer term. In the case of P1, devising a strategy to expand the time available for staff to collaborate and develop their pedagogy better equipped them to meet the unique demands of a difficult student cohort.

9.6 Resistance in the interests of students

Resistance in the work of school leaders is often aimed directly at securing students' best interests. Closely tied to the view that the core purpose of their work is to guide the development of their students as people, and not simply their academic performance on standardised tests, resistance in their interest frequently takes the form of meeting student needs that fall outside the standard responsibilities of teaching.

Resistance in the interests of students has included the strategic oversight of academic offerings within schools to both achieve Departmental targets, and to reinvent the curriculum in the image of what students need and value. P18 is the principal at a single-sex school with complex social needs in a low socio-economic status area in Greater Sydney. In response to the needs of their students, many of whom are often interested in pursuing training or apprenticeship opportunities, P18 has spent several years developing an entirely unique curriculum that is offered in parallel to the standard NSW public education curriculum.

Where I push the boundary is with the big curriculum policy. I have to offer the standard curriculum, but no student has to do it. The department hasn't tested this in any official capacity. I have to offer the standard curriculum, which I do, but a student has a choice not to – no student *has* to do it. So they can choose to do a set of courses and hours that don't equate to a Record of Student Achievement [a standard academic milestone] in Year 10. Okay, *they* can make that choice. I give them the ability to make that choice. (P18)

P23 and P28 have also dedicated discretionary funding to the development of classes and facilities to support trades, such as barbering, and online gaming: areas of interest selected carefully to reflect what motivates their students. However, as far as P18 is aware, no other school in the state has developed an entirely separate curriculum offering on the scale implemented at their school. Focused on providing a range of subjects outside the standard curriculum, many of which are vocational or trade-based, P18 has dedicated an immeasurable quantity of labour beyond what is required of them in order to grow an offering that sets their students up for employment opportunities in their areas of interest. This has involved the establishment of industry partnerships, pursued entirely by the principal. The labour involved in this alone is testament enough to P18's student-centred approach to school leadership, however the existence of such a program is not without risk. Deviating from the standard curriculum has driven P18 to maintain close relationships with senior leadership in the Department of Education, without the ongoing approval of which he believes the unconventional program at his school could easily be removed. Nevertheless, this experimentation has involved the

creative reading of policy, and both the will and courage to interpret it differently to better meet the needs of their students:

The Department writes terrible policy — phrases like “should, recommended, best practice” — that doesn’t mean you *have* to do that. *Should* doesn’t mean you *have* to. And I read the word ‘should’ and go, right, ignore that, I don’t have to do that. (P18)

Another example of resistance by a school leader in the interests of students involved creatively approaching the literacy and numeracy targets imposed on their school by the School Success Model. P19 developed a strategic response to the perceived unsuitability of these targets for their school. This particular school is in a regional, low socio-economic area where many students leave school as soon as possible to work in the local primary industry, and behavioural and attendance issues are a significant challenge.

P19 deliberately set up a program with extra learning support for their highest performing students, because they had the “best shot” at bringing up the average performance of their cohort. Explaining this decision, they asserted that:

The rest of them? Forget about it. These targets are so far out of our reach, they don’t even remotely reflect where our kids are at. They need mental health support, and behavioural support, and help with basic literacy and numeracy. [This strategy]

is a way we can meet these targets in some way and then focus on what our students actually need. (P19)

Alongside this, P19 also personally picks some students up from their houses and takes them to school to improve the very basic outcome of their attendance. As P19 explains, the “only” and “easiest way” to improve their performance on this target is through personal intervention. In the regional setting of P19’s community, this practice is possible, but it raises the question of how many school leadership teams could replicate this approach, and indeed, if it would be fair to expect that of them. Ironically, the School Success Model rhetoric claims to be designed in such a way that it avoids the creation of “perverse incentives”: the motivation for schools to achieve a target for reasons other than the purpose of the target itself. However, P19 seems to be doing just that: opting for the simplest method available to raise target performance in their school, whether or not it is sustainable, and with a view to freeing up time, resources and focus that can be dedicated to the unquantifiable needs of the community at large.

Resistance in the interests of students also included targeted disobedience, such as the provision of assistance during exams:

Do I occasionally look over a student’s work [in an exam] and suggest they start a new paragraph when I can see they’ve written an unbroken block of text? Yes. Our students are not competing with the best in the state — they are just trying to get by. (P35)

In this instance, the prohibition on teachers providing assistance during exams was not seen as an issue in and of itself: rather, this school leader considered themselves to be acting in the interests of the 'whole student', and engaging with the reality that they were at a disadvantage in an inequitable system rather than an equal in a perfectly competitive one. This practice demonstrates the knowledge of school leaders that the education system itself is not a means to the same end for all students. At the site of the school, a close understanding of individual students, their background and their needs becomes possible — it is perhaps the only level at which discretion can be appropriately exercised.

9.7 Resistance from within 'corporate': insights from inside the Departmental bureaucracy

While the School Success Model acted as the overarching policy framework for school decision-making and the improvement of educational outcomes during the period of this research, other professional learning and support initiatives also existed in parallel. P7, a head teacher on secondment in a bureaucratic role at the time of interview, was working as part of a team providing professional development and mentorship in a particular subject area. P7 conceptualised their work on this team as resistance, as it was conceived by two school leaders who were successful in pitching their idea to the Department for funding. Initially a small project, it has continued to grow despite its distinctly different *modus operandi* to the School Success Model:

What we do in our space is follow the nested communities model. So essentially our work in these kinds of...teams, they call us the community of practice. So we then engage other teachers through professional learning. We find out...who are the teachers that are excited about our work, and are really taking on board our work, and then we bring them closer to us. So it's kind of like...this is a model for scaling innovation that we're bringing to the understanding of schools and teachers. And so we're seeding a community of practice because we've already tested and tried out our expertise and we know it works. So then we're sharing it with others, and those that are really deeply engaging and authentically using it in their in their own school space — we call them the community of engagement — they're identified as the potential adopters of the work. And so we bring them close to us, and then everybody else around them is the community of interest. So we're in the centre, bubbling away. Then we've got community engagement, then we've got everybody else, the community of interest. So in this leadership model, we are working closely with other teachers. (P7)

The nested communities model explained by P7 indicates a successful alternative to the provision of school support through the imposition of Departmental 'expertise' under the School Success Model. Through delivering professional learning as close peer to peer mentorship, educators have been empowered to share what they have learnt with their wider school communities:

In my other role in this space, I'm also mentoring 24 teachers in different schools. So I'm explicitly mentoring them. We have one hour a week each to talk about pedagogy, to conduct action learning cycles, and then we're using their work to showcase to the state as well. So they're being brought on board. So the work is expanding, expanding, expanding. And what the aim is, I believe, is that everybody who's kind of been brought close to us, they become as good, if not better, right? So they become the masters, you know, and the master can step back and relinquish leadership control or they then spread the word and evangelise. So that's how we can make it work. I can't go to every school. All these other teachers can't go to every school, because it's not sustainable. Instead, it's about building autonomy and empowering those teachers to be researchers of their own practice, to kind of interrogate their own practice, and then lead. They're looking at their own practice but also then looking at how they can build capacity in their faculties. One of them is an early career teacher, but [even though she is only new to teaching] I am also encouraging her to showcase what she's learning to her faculty so that she brings them on board. And so even she acts in a leadership role. (P7)

This form of resistance against the neoliberal logics of the School Success Model is based on the accumulation of the expertise possessed by educators in schools. It encourages adaptation rather than rigid emulation of practice and occurs through organic relationships between teachers rather than prescriptive professional learning modules. This stands in stark contrast to the School Success Model resources developed and delivered by bureaucratic employees who, as explained by P31, often do not have recent experience working in a school. As a school leader-driven response to the

dominant policy framework of the Department, it is a remarkable example of the ways in which school leaders continue to perform labour above and beyond their roles. To resist the mechanisms of control that have so heavily reduced their capacity to innovate even at the local level of the school, school leaders have managed to develop and grow a professional learning initiative that subverts all the most criticised elements of the School Success Model.

P31 also brought a rare, multi-positional perspective on the interplay between Departmental control and resistance in schools. Although not a school leader, as previously discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, P31 was employed in a literacy lead role within the Department at the time of their interview. As a key stakeholder in the execution of initiatives to support the achievement of the School Success Model targets within schools, P31 described a dual nature to their work similar to that of school leaders: “I’ll shift whatever I’m supposed to be doing to meet [the school’s] needs”.

According to P31, there are two ways you can carry out a role like theirs — the way the Department “wants” you to do it, that is, coming from “above” or “without” in order to advise a school how they should do things differently, or the way that P31 chooses to do it: “to ask the school how they would like to be supported, and then to simply do everything in my power to provide that support”. Returning to the use of “us and them” language, P31 described having to covertly identify whether colleagues, with whom lead specialists are often partnered in schools, were more sympathetic to the ‘Departmental’ approach or the school-oriented approach. Overall, this means that the work that P31

would describe as being “motivated by what a school needs” is carried out in secrecy and with deception — a parallel to the notion that principals are also doing “two jobs”.

The resistance of P31 suggests an intentional division and confinement of decision-making and conceptual resources to the ‘corporate’ segment of the Department of Education. When deployed in schools, P31 was instructed by the Department not to cover any classes for teachers, or to teach students under any circumstances at all. As repeatedly highlighted throughout the findings of this thesis, the most pressing issues within schools at the time the interviews were conducted were the result of a state-wide staffing shortage. Due to persistent vacancies, the foremost need in many schools is simply to find another “body” capable of supervising classes (P16). P31 and a colleague with whom they work closely often resisted this directive by covering one teacher’s class so that the teacher can be present in another class in which either P31 or their colleague are demonstrating techniques — “I don’t see how else you can do this effectively otherwise” (P31).

9.8 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the ways in which school leaders not only resist the mechanisms of control in their labour process, but engage in resistance in order to carry out what they view to be their core work. When what school leadership means to them diverges from the purpose implicit in the expectations of the Department of Education, school leaders act in what they view to be in the best interests of their staff, their

students, and themselves. The sense that school leaders are performing “two roles” to uphold these interests is also paralleled in multiple “corporate” roles designed to provide support services to schools under the School Success Model, and alongside it. This provides strong evidence that during this policy period, diverging views around the purpose of public education work have emerged at multiple levels of the NSW public education system.

Similar to public sector workers in adjacent fields, such as allied health and care work (Baines, Brown and Cabahug, 2024), school leaders remain motivated by their moral commitment to education. This leads them to engage in resistance that involves doing *more*, rather than less work. While similar new public management reform has led to teachers internalising neoliberal logics of performance in other contexts (Holloway and Brass, 2018), this research has captured vibrant and enduring forms of resistance amongst the school leaders of the NSW public education system. It remains to be seen how this resistance will evolve under the next iteration of reform, but initiatives such as the nested communities model discussed in the previous section indicate strong efforts to establish an alternative legacy to that of the School Success Model. Alternative modes of professional development that centre and respect the expertise currently held by educators in schools may successfully counteract the neoliberal policy trajectory of public education in NSW.

CHAPTER TEN: NEOLIBERAL STATES, LABOUR CONTROL, AND FALSE- PROLETARIANISATION

10.1 Introduction

This chapter integrates analysis of the challenges evident in the work of school leaders during the School Success Model policy period, the mechanisms of control that most prominently feature in their labour process, and the ways in which school leaders resist these mechanisms of control. In particular, it presents the argument that school leaders are subject to a process of ‘false-proletarianisation’, an original theoretical concept developed out of the findings of this thesis. It articulates the dualistic process by which a neoliberal policy setting formally intensifies and degrades school leaders’ work while simultaneously depending upon them to perform complex conceptual labour. It then discusses the ways that successive new public management reform models have displaced the expectation amongst school leaders that education policy will prioritise the quality of education over political interests. This acts as a form of subjective control, transforming the education system through the gradual normalisation of neoliberal logics. Finally, it unites labour process theory with new public management, reflecting on the outcomes of control mechanisms —and resistance to them— in the labour process of school leaders under neoliberal policy reform.

10.2 False-proletarianisation maintains state control over central decision-making and state resources

The proletarianisation thesis, the central prediction of labour process theory, forecast that over time, to maximise management's control over workers, the conceptual elements of work would be separated from the execution of work in intellectual work just as they had been in manual labour under scientific management (Braverman, 1974; Reid, 2003). As discussed in Chapter 3, several decades of labour process analyses in education work research focused on documenting the fulfilment of this prediction, before analyses began to indicate more complex changes to the work of education. In some cases, including the NSW public education system, teachers' skills have expanded despite worsening job quality and conditions (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018). While Departmental policy exercises close control over the work of school leadership, constraining the time and capacity available for conceptual work, school leaders still maintain a level of inalienable autonomy over their labour. School leaders persist in exercising their own unique forms of educational leadership, developed in response to the specific needs of their staff, students and local communities. This produces a dualistic character in their labour process, as the formal expectations of their role are increasingly administrative, but school leaders continue to carry out vital work without adequate support or system recognition.

The foundation for false-proletarianisation begins with the mechanisms of control in school leaders' labour process that genuinely resemble proletarianisation. As

established in Section 7.3, school leaders' work has undergone degradation, regulated by increasingly prescriptive policy described as a "scaffold" that would allow anyone to perform the role of the principal (P23). A marked increase in administrative and compliance requirements has also intensified their work, as they complete a greater share of the work once carried out by the Department itself. As a result of these processes, the scope for school leaders to innovate through the development of educational leadership initiatives in their schools is often poorly supported or actively discouraged by the Department — for example, in the case of P19. A degraded administrative workload is displacing educational leadership, risking the deskilling of school leaders and the staff they are responsible for as the 'leading learner' in their schools.

The separation of decision-making in the Department bureaucracy from the execution of education delivery has also devalued and decentred the technical expertise of school leaders. As P17 recalled, principals were directly told by the Secretary of Education that there were "no pathways up into the Department for principals", entrenching the exclusion of school-based expertise from decision-making and policy development over their own work. A universally reported experience by study participants was the invisibility of their feedback on their working conditions. Even when school leaders were "consulted" on policy by the Department, as discussed in Section 6.4 in response to the IER, the consultation process was described as "not real" (P1). This mechanism of control reinforces the power of the state and its political interests over public education. Suppressing the capacity for school leaders to contribute conceptually to the

administration of their own centralised education system severely limits the development and proliferation of school leaders' expertise as pedagogical leaders.

However, alongside these processes of degradation, intensification, and the formal separation of conception from execution, the Department has coerced school leaders into performing the conceptual labour required to address systemic structural issues. The dualistic nature of school leaders' labour process reveals itself here. While aspects of leaders' work have declined in quality, they have not been relieved of the most complex work in the entire education system — rather, they are completing it in *addition* to their administrative workloads. The state-wide staffing shortage required school leaders to constantly revise dynamic resource allocation strategies in their schools as discussed in Section 6.2, such as surveying school staff for additional skillsets (P28) and rotating teachers between multiple classes (P17). In some cases, such as that of P13, difficult decisions were made to place up to five aggregated classes under minimal supervision per school period. School leaders then shouldered the multi-faceted local impacts of this structural, system-wide problem on all aspects of their school communities, including cumulative wellbeing issues amongst staff and gaps in student learning. In Section 8.3.3, it was explained that the state response to this complex structural issue was to engage in denial, deflecting the responsibility to provide adequate support through a lack of information transparency and the repeated refusal to acknowledge the existence of the shortage. Moreover, school leaders such as P13, as reported in Section 6.2, remained accountable to their Directors regarding the achievement of the School Success Model targets, indicating insensitivity to the factors inhibiting students' educational outcomes and the capacity of staff to deliver teaching

requirements. The Department necessitated that school leaders address unprecedented challenges in their schools while continuing to aim for system-determined targets that did not shift to align with the challenges they faced. Through a lack of engagement with the very existence of these challenges and the labour school leaders performed to address them, the state enabled the continuation of its long term cost-cutting agenda in public education: despite the formal degradation of their roles, school leaders' complex conceptual labour has found ways to address the system's most pressing challenges without the state increasing resources or support.

Moreover, as thoroughly detailed in Chapter 9, school leaders commonly resist control in their labour process in order to support the delivery of a higher standard of education than is facilitated by state policy and the resources made available by the system. As P1 reflected in Section 9.3, "it's like I'm doing two jobs — everything the Department expects me to do, administration, targets...and then all the actual work" (P1).

False-proletarianisation is therefore a process of, on the one hand, creating conditions that ensure school leaders absorb the responsibilities of the state for addressing difficult structural issues, problem solving and developing new managerial skills as they go, while they are simultaneously devalued by the decision-making arm of the education bureaucracy. In addition to this, at best, school leaders are offered a limited opportunity to provide consultation on the policy decisions that affect them. The true nature of school leaders' work, as revealed by the in-depth interviews reported in the

previous chapters, remains deliberately unrecognised by the state as it seeks to maintain control over central-decision making and resources.

10.3 New public management reform imbues the education system with neoliberal political logics through subjective control

School leaders are highly attuned to the character of the political leadership that oversees the Department of Education. As discussed in Chapter 7, state control over education policy as a political tool has seen school leaders accustomed to the instatement of policy change that disregards educational expertise. Further to this, initiatives were often understood to have been developed for political reasons, designed to generate a favourable public opinion of the state government in response to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the state-wide staffing shortage. This offers evidence of just how significant the impact of the political cycle is on the working lives of school leaders. Not only does the agenda of the presiding government affect what policies and changes are enacted in schools and their claimed purpose, it shapes the nature of the relationship between staff in schools with the so-called “top” of the education system:

Even with communications to the Minister, or the Secretary of the Department of Education, they get sent off to the people who really work in the relevant area of the Department, but their answer is then edited and edited back up the chain, so the

real answer doesn't necessarily get back to you, because it might not align with the political interests of the person it's been written to. (P6)

Educators' awareness of political influence also includes the identification of patterns and cycles, leading them to anticipate policy change for the sake of public perception rather than efficacy:

I can recall when the government changed, the Department being really careful about the School Success Model now being language and a program that existed under the Liberal government that should now no longer be referred to...but now, under the Labor government, they'll just change the names of things. Politics exists within any bureaucracy, but [working in a non-school role] you start to see how much the political machinations are prioritised, and how that pushes student learning further and further out of focus. Everything is about securing the next three-year contract. (P31)

Reflecting on the inadequate support from the Department in response to system challenges, school leaders also offered nuanced explanations pointing to the short term oriented logics of the political cycle:

Oh, they're exasperated by us talking about the teacher shortage — dismissing it as if it's not real. That's what the Minister for Education does. And when I push back,

my director says 'I know'. My feedback goes nowhere, because they're all on 2-year contracts. (P16)

P16 understood there to be a lack of incentive for investment and decision making in long term structural reform. Rather, due to the limited time available within a four-year political term, performance evaluation, project completion and even major system-wide reforms like the School Success Model are engineered to produce short term results — “they are more interested in looking like they have done something that works politically” (P6). Feedback, as referenced by P16, is often disregarded, especially if it falls outside the scope of political priorities. The governmental practice of employing bureaucrats on short term contracts, tied to the precariousness of state funding for education, reinforces these priorities, leading to the perception that “everyone is just looking out for themselves” (P31). The four-year term of the state government and its partisan control over education does not incentivise the complex, multi-faceted and expensive task of improving working conditions system-wide.

In March 2023, after twelve consecutive years of Liberal Party rule, a state election saw the appointment of a Labor government in NSW. In response, the NSW Teachers Federation declared that teachers and principals welcomed the change and branded the hallmarks of the outgoing Liberal government as “neglect and denial” (NSW Teachers Federation, 2023, p.1). Speaking to the urgency of the need to address unsustainable workloads, uncompetitive pay and the ubiquitous strain of the teacher shortage, it was to the new government that the Federation immediately made its appeal. The need for

greater funding and support in so many key areas across the education system are squarely viewed by the Teachers Federation as a function of the government in power, crystallising just how much the state, and the political cycle, dictate the conditions of work in public education (NSW Teachers Federation, 2023).

By September 2023, a new pay agreement had been reached between the NSW Teachers Federation and the NSW Department of Education, the “largest pay rise in decades” according to the state (NSW Government, 2023, p.1) — although this is disputed (Kennett, 2023). Nevertheless, under the wage cap imposed by the previous government, principals and teachers in the NSW public education system were amongst the lowest paid in the entire country, having received nominal wage cuts since inflation began to increase in mid-2020 (Barrett Peters and Timms, 2023). The negotiation of this agreement was the result of extensive campaigning and industrial action, including strikes, as well as the findings of the Gallop report, the independent inquiry into the value of the teaching profession commissioned by the Teachers Federation (NSW Government, 2023, p.1).

The sentiments of some study participants in response to the government change were easily captured in interviews that were held close to election time. In the weeks after the Labor government was appointed, the anticipation of positive change was evident in the outlook of school leaders: “with the change in government, I hope things will be different” (P17). One school leader (P1) cited the shift in language by new Minister for Education and Early Learning, Prue Car, towards simply acknowledging the existence of

the staffing shortage as being a cause for great optimism. Another commented that their executive leadership felt “really positive that nothing has come as a surprise [so far] — I’m hearing about changes to my school from the leadership directly, instead of finding out from the media” (P27). Several school leaders believed that the School Success Model was about to be “totally scrapped” — “the new government don’t want anything to do with it” (P23). Almost a year into the election term, as of February 2024, the webpages that outlined the School Success Model were removed from the NSW Department of Education website. No formal announcement of policy reform has been made, either to indicate that the School Success Model will be phased out, or to clarify what might replace it.

Later, however, in response to the rise in wages negotiated between the Teachers Federation and the new government, cynicism was expressed regarding the limits of positive transformation possible:

We’ve had a pay rise, which needed to happen...but now they’re going to be telling us ‘you don’t need this’ and ‘you don’t need that’. It’s going to be pay-back time, for the next 5 years, I’m sure of it (P3).

Shortly after this followed the introduction of the temporary-to-permanent staffing initiative, detailed in Chapter 8 for its lack of transparency and misleading outcomes. The state claimed to be providing the additional funding required to make temporary staff permanent, meaningfully enhancing schools’ capacity to bear the staffing shortage.

Instead, it only appeared to be doing so — exhibiting another example of a short term solution that seems favourable to the public, but fails to produce long term, effective change. In this case, as P3 explained, it generated further difficulty for school leaders at the local level.

Even after the realisation of a “needed” step towards improving conditions for staff in schools, the experience of school leaders suggests to them that every improvement has a cost. The influence of political interests on decision making and resourcing in the Department is not only an enormous determinant of the quality and nature of work in schools — it has consistently demonstrated itself to fall short of the basic improvements so desperately required by the system. School leaders’ lack of confidence in the prospect that the state might raise wages *and* address persistent, harmful conditions such as unsustainable workloads and the staffing shortage must be considered for its effects on the morale of staff in schools. The long term refusal to meet the minimum needs of the public education system appears to be a form of subjective control in itself: habituated to never expect any improvement to one part of the system without a cost somewhere else, the threshold for the conditions that are accepted by all staff in schools are continuously being eroded.

10.4 Control and resistance in the labour process of school leaders under neoliberal policy reform

Under the School Success Model, the aspects of public education work that resemble more normative control mechanisms — the alignment of school leaders' commitment to public education with the claimed objectives of the public education system itself — appear to have been subverted by more rational mechanisms of control that risk disrupting the prevailing public service ethos in the profession. Despite the marked difference in policy rhetoric from Local Schools, Local Decisions, over the course of a decade both reform models have functioned to reduce the quality of system support available for schools, cutting costs while quantifying the metrics by which schools and school leaders' work are evaluated.

The setting of clear, but narrow targets for school performance, and their perpetuation of limited notions of “school success” reduce the administration of education to politically determined objectives. While these objectives appear to simplify the responsibilities of schools and the system, in reality, as school leaders' experiences of work have indicated, they only erase recognition of the much broader, communitarian purpose of education that school leaders and their staff continue to carry out.

While the administration of the Department may now be determined by these rational control objectives, school leaders' labour process has only expanded to include them alongside the more normative, values-driven task of delivering equitable public

education. The result is false-proletarianisation: the formal intensification and degradation of school leaders' work as they persist, through conceptual labour and resistance that goes unrecognised by the state, to deliver quality teaching and learning. The less that school leaders' additional work in service of quality education delivery is formally captured by quantitative metrics, the smaller the official responsibility of the state to reward and support this work becomes.

In line with a particular variety of post-new public management reforms, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 5, the School Success Model is merely a rebranded continuation of the state's aim to reduce state spending on public services. The prioritisation of cost cutting and rigid administrative conformity in the operation of a school, alongside the degradation of conceptual work, is transforming public education. It appears to have been significantly recast: once a public good from which all Australians could expect universal equity, it is now treated as burden on the tax base that must be continuously made lean and stripped back. School leaders, as the 'squeezed middle' (Harding, Lee and Ford, 2014) at the centre of this transformation, are experiencing severely heightened tensions in their work. As they absorb the damage being inflicted by the Department on one hand, they must also, on the other, combat the burgeoning challenges that a poorly resourced system produces amongst their staff and school communities. While they appear to be managers, the tensions in their labour process see them occupying a contradictory class position more nuanced than that originally articulated by Willmott (1997), who, as discussed in Chapter 3, acknowledged that managers are not always "simply compliant functionaries" (p.1339). School leaders may be "securing surplus value" for the state (Willmott, 1997, p.1339) but they do so in spite of their own

management, not in service of it. The real surplus they produce— the quality of the education they deliver outside of targets and quantified results— is enjoyed by their students and communities in a manner that the neoliberal state is never able to capture.

Considering the existence of subjective control alongside the rational control of the School Success Model, the mechanisms of control in the labour process of school leaders also resemble chimerical control (Sewell, 1998; Thompson, 2003). This offers a glimpse of the future direction control will take in the labour process of school leaders.

Surrounded by heavily quantified markers of school success, and now well accustomed to the additional quantitative dimension of school funding management, school leaders have become habituated to the short term oriented, neoliberal logics of the state. The true depth of the subjective control that these pressures exert over school leaders can only be precisely determined over time. This thesis has presented robust evidence that, despite recent reform, school leaders continue to deliver education to a higher standard than the state formally supports. This finding is reinforced by school leaders' engagement in resistance to control through completing additional labour in the interests of their staff and students. However, the long term trajectory of neoliberal political influence over public education is uncertain. How long can school leaders continue stretching themselves to bridge the gap between the resources the state provides and what schools require for the delivery of high-quality education? More pressing, still, is the question: how long will they want to?

10.5 Conclusion

Through developing the concept of 'false-proletarianisation', this chapter has extended the theoretical tools available to examine the evolution of the labour process of school leaders in a neoliberal policy context.

A labour process analysis of new public management reform, and the combination of theoretical concepts from both fields, has uniquely captured the processes reshaping the work of school leaders in NSW public education. In addition to this, it has thoroughly revealed the extent of political forces in these processes. Neoliberal ideology has deeply established itself within the Australian state and federal governments over the last quarter century. Changes to the work of school leaders, and reformation of public education entirely, cannot be understood without closely examining the political influence driving them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CONCLUSION

11.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes this investigation of the impacts of the School Success Model on school leaders' work in the NSW public education system, the first such study in Australia. Drawing on and rethinking theories of new public management and the labour process, it reiterates the findings from qualitative interviews with school leaders in response to the three research questions driving this thesis: the empirical challenges evident in their work during the School Success Model policy period, the mechanisms of control evident in their labour process, and the ways in which school leaders resist these control mechanisms.

Beginning with an overview and discussion of the thesis, this chapter recalls the importance of studying this period of change in public education work, and its impacts on the work of school leaders in particular. It summarises the main conclusions of its four findings chapters, including its analysis of the policy context into which the School Success Model was introduced, the challenges in school leaders' work during the School Success Model policy period, the mechanisms of control evident in their labour process, and the ways in which school leaders were found to resist these mechanisms of control. It then distils the key theoretical contributions of the research: a unique application of labour process theory to understand the consequences of contemporary new public management reform on pseudo-managerial, public-sector work. Drawing upon these contributions, recommendations for future policy direction are offered. In the interests

of clearly explaining both what this thesis has achieved, and also what worthwhile elements of investigation exist beyond its scope, this chapter also outlines the key limitations of the research. Continuing this discussion, it presents directions for future meaningful research given the many further questions that the findings of this thesis have raised.

11.2.0 Overview and discussion of the thesis

At the nexus between schools and the state, school leaders remain an under-researched, under-represented subject affected by new public management and post-new public management reforms. While claiming to improve the efficiency of public services through the importation of private-sector practices, new public management has produced wide-ranging challenges in public sector work. Recognising the long term project of such reforms to be the remaking of public education work in the image of neoliberal ideology, this thesis investigated the impact of their latest iteration —the School Success Model— on school leaders' work in the NSW public education system.

This thesis adopted a qualitative, 'small *n*' case study methodology, combining a policy and context analysis and 35 semi-structured interviews with school leaders and key stakeholders to answer three research questions:

Research Question #1: What challenges are most evident in school leaders' work during the School Success Model policy period?

Research Question #2: What are the mechanisms by which control is exercised over the work of school leaders under the School Success Model?

Research Question #3: How and why do school leaders resist control mechanisms in their labour process?

11.2.1 *Literature review and theoretical framework*

To begin answering the research questions outlined above, this thesis canvassed the literature around new public management, making explicit its neoliberal origins. It explained that in education, new public management has manifested itself particularly through the introduction of competition within and between education systems, increasing standardisation, and a focus on narrow, quantitative metrics for both academic outcomes and the performance management of educators (Sahlberg, 2016). These hallmarks of reform are all clearly present in the objectives of the School Success Model. While national shifts in the administration and delivery of Australian education have introduced overarching elements in this vein, such as national standardised testing, more specific effects have been experienced unevenly throughout Australian public education. The NSW public education system, the largest education bureaucracy

in the country, has been the last system to undergo significant reforms at the state level. This renders it a case of significant interest for its size and political importance. Its late adoption of reforms similar to those that had been widely criticised for their impacts in neighbouring states points to the endurance and malleability of neoliberal policymaking.

Labour process theory was then introduced as a powerful and necessary tool to foreground the role of the state in reform to school leaders' work. Noting the historical contributions of labour process analyses to the understanding of changes to work in education at the outset of new public management reforms, it provides a means to situate local analyses of education work within the larger picture of capitalist evolution. Considering school leaders' labour process —the ways in which the state exercises control over the work of school leaders to extract as much labour from them as possible— it utilised concepts including work intensification, deskilling, and degradation that articulate the processes transforming education work under new public management reforms.

Different forms of control — normative, rational and chiasmatic, were examined for their potential to lay bare the mechanisms and structures of power in school leaders' labour process. Most significantly, it reviewed the proletarianisation thesis, the once-dominant argument that scientific management approaches to controlling work would eventually dominate service work, including education (Braverman, 1974). Although evidence from contemporary studies of education have refuted the original

proletarianisation thesis, labour process literature has also established that workers can simultaneously experience the degradation of job quality while also being required to upskill (Grugulis and Lloyd, 2017). This outlook shaped the openness of this thesis to the possibilities of dual processes within the labour process of school leaders. Offering a critical lens through which to consider the complex class position presented by the pseudo-managerial nature of school leaders' work, labour process theory also positioned this thesis to capture the ways in which school leaders might resist the control of the state. It explored the richness of personal responses to policy change while rethinking explanations for them.

Integrating the empirical, explanatory capacity of this literature with the theoretical explanatory capacity of labour process theory, this thesis provides a fresh theoretical framework capable of linking changes to public education work to broader political and economic forces.

11.2.2 Policy and Context Analysis

To investigate the impact of the School Success Model, it was first necessary to understand the ways in which it was shaped by the landmark new public management style reform that directly preceded it. Thus, in Chapter 5 this thesis investigated the policy context in which the School Success Model was introduced. At least a decade prior to the School Success Model, the NSW Department of Education began developing and implementing historic, system-wide reform. This originated with Local Schools,

Local Decisions, which promised principals an increased level of control over budgets, staffing, and decision making at the level of the school. Devolving responsibility to the local level was framed as a mechanism for efficiency and adaptability to every school's specific community, overcoming some of the bureaucratic constraints inherent to a system of over 2000 schools. During this period, the Department bureaucracy also underwent restructuring. Central resources that had provided longstanding support to schools, such as subject-specific consultants, were dissolved (Dabaja, 2023). While it expanded autonomy in some areas, principals experienced heightened restrictions around decision making in others, coupled with increased expectations around compliance and intensified managerial and administrative responsibilities (Dabaja, 2023). Workloads intensified in general — not only for school leaders, but all teachers, and even non-teaching school staff (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018). Departmental evaluation revealed that student academic outcomes stagnated or worsened under the policy, and it was labelled a failure. These outcomes closely resembled the adverse effects of new public management reform evident in other public sectors, both within Australia and in other similar nations (Protherough and Pick, 2003). That the stated aims of Local Schools, Local Decisions did not match its outcomes in schools is fundamental to the inquiry of this thesis. It warranted a corresponding examination of the realities of the School Success Model, having introduced the possibility that a disparity might exist between the objectives of a policy and its consequences in schools.

A review of the narratives around the failure of Local Schools, Local Decisions revealed conflicting critiques between key stakeholders in the state apparatus and academic researchers. Departmental evaluation pointed to the lack of expectation that principals

link their local decision making to educational outcomes (CESE, 2020), and both the Australian media and NSW Teachers Federation amplified reports of a 'principal problem'. In contrast, academic research highlighted the bureaucratic restructuring that had eliminated long standing support services for schools and increased responsibilities and workloads for principals (Dabaja, 2023).

The stated aims of the School Success Model were then examined. Chapter 5 determined that the Model's core commitments to 'Shared Responsibility' and providing both 'Quality Support' and 'Time for Schools' positioned schools as responsible for the achievement of system-determined targets around academic outcomes. In tandem, the Department of Education was positioned as responsible for the support required to achieve these targets. Through the claimed reintroduction of central support for schools and decision-making at the local level, and the renewal of state-wide targets for improvement, the School Success Model framed itself as a corrective response to Local Schools, Local Decisions.

Analysis of the policy elements revealed attempts to address the narratives around this failure in several ways, utilising the outcomes of the previous reform to justify its new approach to decision-making, notions of school success, the establishment of targets, and the delivery of support. While Local Schools, Local Decisions emphasised increased autonomy for principals, the School Success Model committed to a reclamation of central responsibility by the Department over decision making. It extended this further by intending to showcase the 'best practice' in the state's top performing schools,

conveying the notion that the definition of success in schools could be achieved by scaling, emulating and applying particular practices universally. This contrasted with Local Schools, Local Decisions' focus on the need to tailor notions of success and ways to achieve it to the specific needs of every school community. Most notably, it set ambitious system-wide targets for all schools, promising locally negotiated steps towards these targets for each school. This was accompanied by a commitment to delivering greater support to schools, introducing a three-tiered support system (universal, guided and strategic support) and offering different resources to schools based on their level of need. This ostensibly reinforced the role of the Department in the pursuit of progress towards their system-wide goals. When considered together, the elements of the School Success Model signalled clear expectations for system-wide progress towards state determined targets, and their packaging as a corrective reform imply the previous absence of state control at this level.

Despite the appearance of the School Success Model as a reform focused on Departmental support and clear guidance, even the earliest interviews conducted for this research revealed an insufficient level of resourcing to meet the government's stated commitments. In addition to this, the School Success Model did not withdraw any of the aspects of Local Schools, Local Decisions that contributed to workload intensification. Rather, it built upon them, contradicting the promise of additional support. Through its policy and context analysis, Chapter 5 shows that while the School Success Model represented itself as a corrective shift away from the principles of Local Schools, Local Decisions, in practice, it has only continued the long term neoliberal policy trajectory of the NSW Department of Education. Despite initial policy rhetoric

promising local autonomy and empowerment, and then committing to system support and guidance, both reforms have functioned to tighten state control over work in schools and enabled the close rationalisation required for continuous system-wide cost cutting.

11.2.3 Empirical challenges during the School Success Model policy period

School leaders' work is complex and highly varied, and so too are their schools and communities: often, their work cannot be sufficiently understood without knowledge of their specific school contexts. These contexts are also shaped by contemporary events in wider Australian society, and are continuously subject to change. To build the necessary foundation for a labour process analysis of school leaders, Chapter 6 captured the most salient challenges evident in their work under the School Success Model policy period. These included the COVID-19 pandemic, a state-wide teacher shortage in NSW, the introduction of a new behaviour policy called 'Inclusive, Engaging and Respectful Schools' and the 'Team Around a School' approach to supporting students with social and behavioural issues.

COVID-19 created unprecedented challenges for all schools, and the timing of the pandemic at the outset of this research meant that the experiences of participants during this period permeated all interviews. Most significantly, the burnout and stress generated during this time was referenced by school leaders for the ripple effect that,

even years later, contributes to wellbeing issues amongst their staff and broader communities.

All school leaders interviewed for this research experienced significant complications as a result of the state-wide staffing shortage. Persistent vacancies and a lack of adequate Departmental support around sourcing staff created operational challenges that changed day to day: the direst manifestation of these was the necessity that several classes each day would be combined and left under minimal supervision as no teachers were available to deliver the curriculum.

The development of both the 'Inclusive, Engaging and Respectful Schools' behavioural reform and the 'Team Around a School' approach to supporting students with social and behavioural issues highlighted the adverse consequences in school leaders' working lives that resulted from their exclusion from the policy development process.

Overall, the School Success Model set explicit targets for the system-wide improvement of educational outcomes, and framed the attainment of these targets as a determinant of academic progress. The empirical challenges in school leaders' work revealed that before matters of academic progress can even be considered, they must navigate significant obstacles to the operation of their schools on a daily basis. Highly complex social and behavioural issues amongst students, staff resourcing, and wider community issues present immediate challenges that must often take priority over educational leadership.

11.2.4 Control mechanisms in the labour process of school leaders

Wide ranging mechanisms of control were found to be embedded in the labour process of school leaders, functioning to exploit their labour in both routine and structural ways. The foundational, everyday pressure in school leaders' work was intensified by the ever-growing administrative workload on these employees. As resourcing in the Department has decreased, school leaders have been required to perform more of the work historically completed by Departmental bureaucrats. Constantly providing evidence of their own compliance with Departmental expectations, the time available for school leaders to engage in educational leadership has been eroded.

Following on from this intensification has been the degradation of some aspects of school leaders' work, as they have experienced tighter state control through an increasingly prescriptive policy "scaffold" (P23). This has "stifled creativity" (P19), reducing the scope for school leaders to innovate when responding to the local needs of their schools. Directives around local data collection function to shift state accountability, as school leaders are required to present evidence of systemic challenges in their schools to the Department to prove that these problems really do exist. State control over education policy, used as a political tool, was also found to produce disruptive changes to the delivery of education.

More indirect forms of control exist alongside these routine mechanisms, concealing the full extent of the state's role in maximising the exploitation of school leaders' labour.

The quantification of school performance through narrowly defined targets and notions of success has erased recognition for educators' work outside these metrics, focusing on the production of politically deployable statistics while demoralising staff in schools. A lack of transparency in the relationship between school leaders and the state has also functioned to deflect state accountability in multiple ways, including in the determination of targets and eligibility criteria for central support, the workplace implications of highly visible policy change such as the temporary-to-permanent-staffing initiative, and the bureaucratic denial of systemic challenges such as the state-wide staffing shortage.

Fundamentally, the chief mechanism of structural control has been the persistent separation of conception from the execution of work in schools. School leaders have been systematically excluded from meaningful decision-making processes around their work, with avenues for consultation, feedback, and promotion into the Department's organisational hierarchy all severely limited.

11.2.5 Resistance in the labour process of school leaders

School leaders were found to engage in resistance in the interests of their own work, in the interests of staff, and in the interests of students. In a significant departure from traditional notions of the private sector manager, school leaders' views regarding policy

purpose, in this case of education itself, often diverged from those of the Department, motivating them to resist control over their own work as a means to securing better conditions for their staff and higher quality education for their students.

This thesis demonstrates that resistance has become such a core element of school leaders' everyday role in schools that it actually constitutes the work of school leadership. School leaders engage in resistance in order to continue delivering education to the standard that aligns with their social commitment to their staff, students and communities. School leaders act as a filter, engaging in active efforts to protect their staff from the workload pressures of Departmental policy reform. From organising formal industrial action, such as in the case of P21, to P1's innovating around the restrictive suspension criteria of the IER through the creation of a 'reflection room', school leaders employed creative and varied strategies to reduce the harmful impacts of Departmental directives on work in schools.

In particular, the attitudes of principals towards resistance — that is, whether they took action to enable it — worked to support or inhibit practices of resistance in their schools by other members of staff. As the apex of local school leadership, principals made resistance possible for educators at all levels of their schools.

11.2.6 *Neoliberal states, labour control, and false-proletarianisation*

This thesis then integrated analysis of the findings presented in Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9, by addressing: the challenges evident in the work of school leaders under the School Success Model policy; the routine and structural mechanisms of control in their labour process; and the ways in which school leaders resist these mechanisms of control.

Extending and reworking the theoretical tools available to examine the evolution of the labour process of school leaders under neoliberalism, the study introduced the original theoretical concept of 'false-proletarianisation'. Developed to capture the dualistic process emerging in school leaders' work detailed in the findings of this thesis, it refers to the way a neoliberal policy setting formally intensifies and degrades school leaders' work while simultaneously depending upon them to perform complex conceptual labour. This process allows the state to maintain the close control over school leaders' work required to continuously cut public costs while avoiding the collapse of the entire education system.

The thesis also presented discussion of the cumulative impacts of over a decade of new public management reform to the work of public education in NSW. Neoliberal logics have been gradually normalised over an extended period of policy change by successive governments, ensuring that school leaders and staff in schools have come to expect the constant rationalisation of their resources. This appears to be the result of the

subjective control mechanisms that the thesis uncovered. These are difficult to illuminate, but are likely to persist and evolve within the labour process of educators.

11.3.0 Central tensions evident in the work of school leaders under the School Success Model policy

Chapter 6, section 6.5 discussed a powerful anecdote shared by P12 that illustrated how important relationships are to the successful delivery of education. P12 described a teacher who was always thoroughly prepared for class with “structures, resources and activities” and yet, because they hated their students and could not build positive relationships with them, was a “total failure”. P12 emphasised that it is through relationships that respect and success as an educator are earned.

This reflection distils the underlying shortcomings of the School Success Model, which sought to define success narrowly and reduce professional development to mass-distributed instruction rather than embedded, experiential pedagogy. The reality, as this thesis has clearly demonstrated, is that genuine leadership, pedagogy, and academic success require the building and maintenance of genuine relationships. Just as the promise of new public management’s “government in a box” has fallen short of producing lasting effectiveness in public sector work (Pollitt and Bouckært, 2011), high quality leadership, as defined by participants in this research, requires time and understanding. It can never be achieved through box-ticking exercises.

If education is about relationships, then it must be understood that it is not only about the relationships between staff and their students. It is also about the relationship between staff and the system. In a public education system, education is as much about what is invested in the local school as it is what that local school does for its student body and community. The School Success Model, Local Schools, Local Decisions, and other reforms and initiatives have signalled a lack of respect through their refusal to foreground the needs of school leaders and teachers. Just as the students in P12's anecdote were affected by the lack of respect in their relationship with their teacher, so too is the state of education. It has far-reaching consequences. The insights into school leaders' work presented by this thesis make clear that the NSW public education system is functioning on the goodwill of school leaders and the wider workforce on the ground in schools. It is tempting, and concerning to suggest that it is on 'borrowed time' because to school leaders it appears that these resources are unsustainable: they will soon run out. The question remains as to what will become of education if they do.

This general malaise in the relationship between school leaders and the state can be further understood as encapsulated by three tensions present in their work. These include a tension between short term initiatives and long term planning, a tension between external support and embedded knowledge, and a tension between state policy and school practice: the disparity between what policy appears designed to achieve and its actual outcomes in schools.

11.3.1 *Short term initiatives versus long term planning*

A clear tension emerged in the experiences of school leaders under the School Success Model between short term initiatives, cycles and results, which were seen by these leaders as oriented towards political interests, and the long term planning and investment that school leaders believe is necessary to enable sustained progress.

Several school leaders referenced incidents where they had seen initiatives, such as the move to make mathematics compulsory, announced in the media by politicians before it had been communicated to them directly. This was considered to be driven by political interests, aiming to shape the short term opinion of the public despite long term consequences for schools without any consultation.

School leaders' capacity to plan for the long term needs of their schools were inhibited by the precarity of school budgets, and the way in which available discretionary funds are subject to change. In several cases, school leaders reported that they had chosen not to spend discretionary funding as they were promised it would be available to them in the following academic year, only to be told it was withdrawn because they did not spend it. This political bind to the state's Treasury over the needs of schools offers the most materially literal example of the prioritisation of the short term 'saving' of funds over a long term investment in schools.

School leaders' powers to hire staff in temporary positions with their discretionary equity funding, introduced under Local Schools, Local Decisions but continued under the School Success Model and beyond, has also entrenched short term time logics. As schools have become dependent on and integrate these staff members into their communities, they do so knowing they may not have the funding to sustain these positions. This forces school leaders to permanently factor in precarity amongst a large number of their staff — unable to plan for or count on their ongoing presence. The temporary-to-permanent staffing initiative discussed in Chapter 8, where it was imposed upon school leaders that they absorb temporary staff into permanent positions paid for using discretionary funds, rather than the central funds of the Department of Education, presents another large-scale disruption to school leaders' long term planning. Consequently, schools without the sufficient budget to keep employing these newly permanent teachers year to year will ultimately lose these teachers to other schools because the system will centrally allocate them roles elsewhere. School leaders were also denied the agency to find truly permanent roles for these teachers, many of whom had become deeply integrated into their school communities.

11.3.2 *External support versus embedded knowledge*

In providing the tiers of support to which it committed, the modus operandi of the School Success Model was to provide external support and instruction to schools — designed to be executed at a distance, at scale, in as little time as possible to as many schools as possible. This first became evident in Chapter 5, as P5 revealed their role as

an EAL/D education leader involved regular work outside of school hours. Frequent requests for support from schools outside their allocated network indicated uneven resourcing throughout the education system.

Building upon this, a recurrent theme within the wider findings of the research was the incompatibility of externally imposed direction and support with the genuine needs of schools. While this scaled model appeared economically efficient, it did not allow for an understanding of education as a collaborative process. The knowledge embedded in schools, and their relationships with their students, is a crucial element of what produces successful education. The prohibition on specialist support staff within the Department such as P31 providing services other than direct, instructional professional learning modules (for example, covering classes to aid in lesson observation) reflects the neoliberal attitude of the School Success Model: that what is best practice in schools is knowledge that sits *outside* of schools, rather than co-created with a local understanding of the specific needs of that school.

In contrast to this, Chapter 6 explained the positive impact of Student Support Officers (SSOs), locally embedded staff in a school's wellbeing team. School leadership was best complemented by Departmentally funded resources such as SSOs for their capacity to build an authentic understanding of a school and its needs over time. The flexibility of the functions they were able to perform presented an alternative model to the rigid imposition of external support, offering school leaders scope to develop and utilise the local expertise held in schools.

11.3.3 *State policy versus school practice*

A neoliberal dualism appears entrenched in every aspect of work in the NSW public education system. This study of the impacts of the School Success Model has revealed the many disparities between the claimed objectives and commitments of the state and the realities of work in schools. Analysis of the control mechanisms evident in school leaders' work inadvertently uncovered the lack of transparency in the relationship between school leaders and the Department bureaucracy. In particular, the bureaucratic denial of systemic challenges functioned to deflect the 'shared accountability' for structural problems promised by the School Success Model. State control over education policy as a political tool, involving the announcement of policy reforms to garner political favour amongst the public, routinely failed to achieve meaningful improvement in schools.

This dualism was most closely embodied in the labour process of school leaders themselves — as P1 notably reported, "it's like I have two jobs". School leaders must, on the one hand, meet the heavy administrative, reporting and compliance requirements of the Department to comply with the formal expectations of their role. On the other hand, school leaders work above and beyond, and sometimes, as detailed in Chapter 9, *against* what is expected of them to continue carrying out what they believe to be the true purpose of their roles.

11.4 Recommendations for future policy directions

Informed by the challenges evident in school leaders' work, and school leaders' calls for reform in their own words, this thesis offers three key recommendations for the direction of future policy within the NSW Department of Education. These include the centring of school leaders in Departmental decision-making, a shift towards a locally-embedded understanding of pedagogical expertise in the development of policy, and the enhancement of school leaders' capacity to make long term decisions and engage in planning for tomorrow.

The foremost recommendation is the genuine incorporation of school leaders in the processes of decision-making and policy development pertaining to their own work. All subjects interviewed for this research indicated frustration at their separation from decision making processes in the Department. Every school leader detailed at least one way in which major policy reform, shifts in organisational structure and resources, or changes to technological infrastructure were implemented in ways that clearly bypassed consideration for their expertise as leaders and the adverse consequences that would be produced at the school level.

At present, the bureaucratic component of the Department of Education, or 'corporate', as it is referred to within the wider public education system, is renowned for its separation from staff in schools and their leaders. School leaders understood senior Departmental leadership as having been recruited for their "business expertise", which

was universally regarded by interviewees as antithetical to school leaders' values and motivations as educators in a public system. Their selection by political leaders was also regarded as serving political interests over educational ones — especially given their importation from non-educational fields. Frequent reference was made to bureaucratic employees as having little to no experience in schools, or to the conclusion that such employees were likely to be those who “could not cut it” in schools. School leaders attributed this lack of experience to the absence of thought for the realities of work in schools reflected in Departmental policy and decision making.

Empirically, this gap in expertise in the decision-making arm of the Department produces challenges for school leaders and staff, such as the workload pressures and dangers to physical and psychological safety posed by the Inclusive, Engaging and Respectful Schools behavioural policy reform. From a labour process perspective, the concentration of decision-making power in the bureaucracy entrenches the proletarianisation of school leaders and staff, eroding their opportunities to develop as educators, and threatening to completely transform what it means to be a teacher. In NSW, the high rate of turnover in the profession, for early career teachers especially, in combination with the reduction in demand for places in education degrees — and therefore a lowering in the standards for admission into these degrees — might indicate that this transformation is already well in motion (Robinson, 2018).

A new public management style approach to the administration of education, which prioritises the apparent economic efficiency of the system, has demonstrated an

incapacity to place educational interests before profit. In order to cut costs, it has sought to devolve as many operating functions as possible from a hollowed-out centre to the local level of the school. A reduction in the quality and availability of resources has neglected to adequately support teachers in becoming confident, autonomous educators, and intensified workloads through increased administrative responsibilities. This is the result of the exclusion of school leaders from policy development and decision making. In the short term, it might suit the economic interests of the state to administer a workforce of teachers who are experts in ticking boxes, rather than accommodating the individual needs of students as people. To do so takes time, and deep investment in teachers, students and schools. It requires engaging with the reality that teachers possess inalienable control over their classrooms — to do so with trust and the intention to advance their skills as educators, rather than interchangeable androids that carry out instructions. School leaders advocate for the professional development of their teachers; their success as mentors who have supported other teachers in the practice of education is a fundamental aspect of their qualification for school leadership. Centring the expertise of school leadership in Departmental decision making and the development of policy is vital if we value an education system that values its own teachers. Without this basic shift, it seems unreasonable to expect students will emerge from their public schooling as well rounded, critical thinking and civically-active young Australians.

Secondly, this thesis recommends a policy shift away from models of support, such as the one implemented by the School Success Model, that externalise pedagogical expertise and attempt to provide instruction at scale. Instead, it recommends an

approach to support grounded in involved, long term mentorship for educators that foregrounds their local expertise and equips them to adapt to the unique needs of every school and classroom. The School Success Model framed 'best practice' as something that could be imposed upon schools, failing to account for the specificities in each school context that require sensitivity and adaptation. Specialist staff employed to provide this support were spread thinly across networks in need, often unable to provide enough assistance to meet demand. Strictly instructed to deliver centrally designed professional development modules without deviation, these specialist staff were also forbidden to modify content — eliminating the possibility for any locally shaped or bespoke elements to their support. In addition to this, school leaders, and the specialist staff assigned to schools to deliver strategic support, were excluded from the decision-making processes that determined the duration of time over which their school would receive this support. The result was a highly prescriptive program that eliminated the possibility for collaboration or personalised guidance, structurally unable to engage with the particularities of each school. Despite the dominance of the School Success Model as a policy that overarched the entire education system, this research also revealed the existence of alternative approaches to professional development within the Department. In particular, the 'nested communities' approach aims to closely mentor engaged teachers, and then equip them to then coach other teachers in their schools in a similar way. The success of this approach provides evidence that more long term, locally focused alternatives can and do work effectively within the same public education system. Rather than positioning one-size-fits-all, external expertise as superior to the knowledge that sits within schools, an orientation towards developing and sustaining locally embedded expertise will enable Departmental resources to create real progress. As P7 postulated in Chapter 9 while discussing the nested communities

model, it will likely never be “efficient” for a public education system to provide one-on-one mentorship — but if focus can shift from cost rationalisation and control to the pedagogical and personal development of educators, the system can better sustain itself through genuine peer-to-peer mentorship.

Thirdly, the capacity for long term decision making and investment in schools at the local level must also be enhanced. School leaders frequently illustrated the ways in which the increasingly short term orientation of contracts, initiatives and budgets impeded their ability to plan for the future of their schools. Continuously changing and sometimes conflicting information regarding whether schools could save unspent portions of their budgets left school leaders unable to accumulate funds for larger infrastructure projects, or anticipated needs in the years to come. Similarly, school leaders were impeded by their inability to make temporary staff permanent on their own terms, funded by the system, rather than the Department’s initiative that mandated schools make temporary staff permanent on their own annually fluctuating, discretionary funding. Dictated by the political cycle and its term-based logics, the NSW public education system has forced school leaders to accommodate the temporary, shifting nature of the state — rather than the state accommodating the desire for schools to build the communities of tomorrow.

11.5.0 Limitations of the research

11.5.1 *Sampling*

It is difficult to develop a representative sample of public educators, precisely because their work is so varied and so grounded in the local. Word of mouth and passive snowball referrals played a significant role in the recruitment of participants for this research. Finding school leaders who were willing, interested and able to set aside an hour or more for an interview was difficult — especially because of the constraints enormous workloads place on their time. As a result, the majority of participants in this research belong to the same regional network in the NSW public education system. This led to a rich understanding of the challenges within this particular network, and is valuable in and of itself for the insights it provided into the realities of work within these schools. Despite this, the system includes eight networks in total, and future research, if given the resources, could endeavour to source participants from all of them. A better geographic sample, and a better developed sample across these regions would undoubtedly reveal different challenges and manifestations of the same structural issues present for the participants of this thesis.

11.5.2 *Gender*

As the first and only investigation of school leaders' work in NSW during the School Success Model policy period, and given the challenges that emerged when recruiting school leaders, it was paramount for this thesis to include any and all school leaders possible. This led to a rich foundation of understanding with respect to the central matter of control: a universal element of school leaders' work. However, to establish this broad, thematic focus, it had to forego investigations of the more specific intersections that occur within this work — gender being the most salient.

While this research was unable to focus on gender, gender relations are of great analytical significance given the historical feminisation of the education sector. This global trend persists in the contemporary NSW public education system, with 73.68% of teachers in NSW schools being female (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023). Despite this, men are still promoted into leadership roles at disproportionate rates (McGrath, 2020). It is possible that accounting for differences in gender between school leaders might reveal significant variations in their experience of this work, including the ways in which they are controlled and the ways in which they resist.

With respect to global shifts in education reform, Apple has long argued that attempts to rationalise the work of teachers have always been out of considerations for the factors of gender *and* class, which intersect to constitute the profession, those who enter it, and the conditions of their work (Apple, 2012). Accounting for gender and class is important when analysing the labour process, revealing any mechanisms of control

that only emerge at their specific intersection. Again, the research conducted by this thesis forms a foundational labour process analysis upon which future research can build, but in doing so, it must consider these axes of identity that have so often been exploited to entrench inequality within work.

11.5.3 Level of experience amongst school leaders

As mentioned throughout the research, the high level of turnover in the NSW public education system has seen teachers rapidly promoted into management roles at all levels in order to meet leadership needs. This research was unable to account for the levels of experience within its sample, or specifically analyse the differences in levels of experience for the ways in which they might reveal how the labour process has changed over time.

11.6 Future research directions

Public sector work remains an important subject of research. As governments evolve and change, so too do their approaches to the administration of the most fundamental services in society. This research has focused on the trajectory of new public management style reform in Australia, a western, OECD nation with liberal market economy characteristics — often associated with, and known to import ideas from, the UK, USA and neighbouring New Zealand. New public management has established a

legacy in these countries which warrants ongoing examination. In addition to the European states, as early adopters and innovators of neoliberal policy technologies, they are default choices for analysis of the effects of new public management, as several decades have rendered the consequences of reform more evident. Of global significance is the way that other countries, with less direct affiliation to the aforementioned states, have begun to exhibit variegated forms of new public management and post-new public management in their public sectors. Investigations of these emerging forms of administration and their impacts are paramount.

Post-new public management has also grown many faces in response to the challenging and wide-ranging consequences of the importation of private-sector practices into the public sector. This thesis examined an instance where the post-new public management policy approach of the state government was, in fact, new public management repackaged. Identifying where, and by what means this kind of 'non-change' occurs is necessary in all systems where it is claimed that the adverse effects of new public management style reforms have been addressed by new policy. In addition to this, however, post-new public management responses that have succeeded in restoring or creating systems of work that centre the service and the worker must also be studied – especially in order to understand what effective, corrective reform might look like.

With respect to the NSW public education system in particular, a fertile area for future research is the work within the Department bureaucracy. This thesis was fortunate to secure an interview with one full time Department employee (P31), and this participant,

as well as those from the several school leaders who had become Directors or had prior experience in bureaucratic roles, provided highly valuable insight into its culture and workings. As the findings of this thesis emphasise, there exists a deliberate and continuously reproduced separation between the work of the Department of Education and work in schools themselves. Elements of Departmental work are shrouded in secrecy, and subject to political influence in such great force that it was capable of compromising and veering education-oriented work off course. In addition to this, however, some interview data suggested that factions exist within the Department which actively resist these political influences in order to better meet the needs of schools, deepen the professional development of teachers, and direct resources towards the needs of the whole student, rather than the achievement of narrowly defined academic targets. Further investigation into the forms of resistance that exist within the Department of Education would provide vital understanding of the ways in which different interests are upheld and negotiated in this region of work that exists so close to the control centre of the state as an employer. It would also provide closer knowledge of the ways in which control mechanisms are devised and implemented within the Department.

11.7 Conclusion

In its investigation of the effects of neoliberal reform on school leaders' work in the NSW public education system, this thesis makes three original and significant contributions.

Firstly, its application of labour process theory to better understand the consequences of new public management reform uniquely combines public management literature with tools designed specifically for the analysis of capitalist work. As the boundaries between the public and private sectors have become increasingly blurred, studies of the public sector have required a more critical, political-economic lens capable of incorporating an understanding of this work as encroached upon and subject to capitalist evolution. This allowed for its novel extension of labour process theory through the concept of ‘false-proletarianisation’: the dualistic phenomenon by which school leaders’ work is formally devalued and degraded, while the public education system remains reliant on their continued conceptual labour — often carried out as resistance to state control or through additional, unrecognised work.

Secondly, it has focused on the work of school leaders specifically, whose voices and experiences, despite their place at the centre of these reforms, have been under-researched and under-represented. As revealed through the rich interview material and the findings around school leaders’ resistance, the role of school leaders in the enactment of neoliberal policy should never be assumed to align with the state. Their interests and class position, while potentially different from the teachers they lead, does not automatically resemble those of traditional private sector managers. In this study, school leaders engaged in robust resistance against state agendas of cost-cutting and under-resourcing.

Thirdly, it has studied an Australian case, which offers benefits in understanding the way that the NSW public education system has persisted with devolution. Claims to re-centralise can be made sense of as acts of deception within the broader national context of neighbouring state projects that have been harder, and more obviously neoliberal. As capitalism and public sectors continuously remake themselves, studies of education not only reveal the ways in which the state seeks to maintain control over this public service, but the evolution of its priorities in relation to the development of future Australian citizens.

In studying control over public sector work, the primary foci of management are better revealed, and in turn, the political agenda and interests of the state can be more clearly examined. In neoliberal states, where the aims of public policy and management are often obscured or mystified, it is not just the question of what policy claims to do that should invite examination, but what policy actually does. The outcomes that policies in education work and other fields actually produce cannot be assumed to align with what initially policy claims to achieve. This labour process analysis of school leaders' work during the School Success Model policy period provides strong evidence that rather than re-centralising and expanding system-wide support as claimed, it only continued the long term rationalisation and cost-cutting of the entire education system. It is through tighter control that the bottom line improves, but responsive, dynamic teaching and engaged educational leadership become an afterthought.

To better understand control, we must also understand resistance to it, and future research should stay receptive to its presence in order to capture a holistic understanding of the labour process and work more broadly. Resistance reveals exactly what elements of controlled subjects' work that they demand must remain and why. It further reveals what cannot be eliminated, and what continues to be carried out even at great cost to workers themselves. In the public service of education, these matters are of the utmost civic importance: they represent what the leaders of our schools consider to be worth fighting for. This research suggests that for many educators — school leaders *and* teachers — this is foremost a steadfast commitment to educating the whole student. Rather than a one-size fits all approach that models universal ideas of school success and measures the progress of every student by the same benchmarks, educating the whole student means understanding the unique meaning of success for every individual. This process, based in the time and sincerity required to foster quality human relationships, cannot be manufactured on demand, more quickly, or for a cheaper price. Wherever education appears to take place with fewer staff, fewer resources, and less funding, we can be sure it has not become more 'efficient'. In the end, someone will always bear the cost.

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Appendix A: Table of Interview Data

Participant	Date of Interview	Interview Duration (minutes)	Format	Position	School/Organisation
P1	29/10/2021	120	In person	Principal	School 1 (Single Sex)
P2	13/03/2024	80	In person	Deputy Principal	School 1 (Single Sex)
P3	13/03/2024	100	In person	Deputy Principal	School 1 (Single Sex)
P4	10/02/2022	60	Virtual	Deputy Principal	School 1 (Single Sex)
P5	16/02/2022	60	Virtual	Deputy Principal	School 1 (Single Sex)
P6	24/01/2023	120	In person	Deputy Principal	School 1 (Single Sex)
P7	13/05/2022	60	Virtual	Head Teacher	School 1 (Single Sex)
P8	23/10/2021	60	Virtual	Teacher	School 1 (Single Sex)
P9	11/05/2022	65	Virtual	Principal	School 2 (Coeducational)
P10	20/10/2022	120	In person	Director	Department of Education
P11	27/09/2022	80	Virtual	Principal	School 3 (Coeducational)

P12	16/03/2023	140	In person	Principal	School 4 (Single Sex)
P13	10/03/2023	60	In person	Principal	School 5 (Coeducational)
P14	09/11/2022	90	Virtual	Director	Department of education
P15	16/11/2022	80	In person	Principal	School 6 (Coeducational)
P16	04/04/2023	60	In person	Principal	School 7 (Coeducational)
P17	16/03/2023	60	In person	Principal	School 8 (Coeducational)
P18	05/08/2022	90	In person	Principal	School 9 (Single Sex)
P19	25/08/2022	85	In person	Principal	School 10 (Coeducational)
P20	28/04/2023	60	In person	Principal	School 11 (Single Sex)
P21	04/07/2023	120	In person	Principal	School 12 (Single Sex)
P22	23/10/2021	115	Virtual	Principal	School 13 (Coeducational)
P23	23/10/2021	70	Virtual	Deputy Principal	School 13 (Coeducational)

P24	15/06/2023	60	Virtual	Principal	School 14 (Coeducational)
P25	11/05/2022	75	In person	Principal	School 15 (Coeducational)
P26	28/06/2023	60	In person	Principal	School 16 (Coeducational)
P27	29/06/2023	60	In person	Principal	School 17 (Coeducational)
P28	30/06/2023	60	In person	Principal	School 18 (Single Sex)
P29	14/07/2023	80	In person	Principal	School 19 (Single Sex)
P30	30/06/2023	60	In person	Principal	School 20 (Coeducational)
P31	10/07/2023	120	In person	Literacy Lead	Department of Education
P32	25/07/2023	180	In person	Principal	School 21 (Coeducational)
P33	11/12/2023	80	In person	Principal	School 22 (Single Sex)
P34	11/12/2023	75	In person	Deputy Principal	School 22 (Single Sex)
P35	11/12/2023	60	In person	Deputy Principal	School 22 (Single Sex)