School accountability in the Western Australian public school sector:

Perceptions of leaders in the field

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work, which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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This dissertation has been presented for the degree of Masters of Education and has been formatted in accordance with American Psychological Association Publication Guidelines.

Abstract

The study investigates school leaders' understanding of the influence of accountability policy on school improvement. The focus is on the leaders' experiences of implementing accountability policy, with reference to policy stability, coherence and consistency. More specifically, the research examines how school self-assessment and school review, two aspects of the Western Australian Department of Education and Training's school accountability policy, are perceived to influence the practices of educators to bring about improvements for students.

Much has been written about school improvement, effectiveness, accountability and leadership. However, the implementations of accountability policies, which purport to achieve school improvement, have not been widely studied in Western Australia. Furthermore, the perspectives of those making judgements of school performance are not widely evident in the Australian literature. As the nature and pace of accountability reforms continue, the implementation of accountability policy is an area that warrants further examination.

The Australian reforms echo changes in other developed countries. The Australian accountability agenda includes national student testing, a national curriculum and the publication of school performance data. These reforms are consistent with a framework, which emphasises increasing devolution of responsibility for student achievement to

schools, concurrent with explicit expectations of student performance as part of school accountability. From 2002 to 2007, Western Australian Public Schools used school review as a formal mechanism for reporting a school's improvement and school self-assessment practices to the Department of Education and Training.

In the past decade, policy shifts reflect an increasingly managerial, bureaucratic approach to accountability. The characteristics of this approach contrast with a professional orientation, which acquires authority by virtue of collective professional knowledge. A managerial approach acquires authority through structural hierarchy. However, in the educational setting, the success of accountability policy implementation is mediated by the orientation of teachers and principals.

This study draws on semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected small sample of district directors and school principals. The participants represent a range of management experience, school size, school type and school location. The data were analysed for themes and then represented using narratives. Narratives are advantageous to this type of qualitative study where participants report diverse experiences because they can be synthesised to illuminate context and meaning to a phenomenon.

The findings of this study indicate tensions between principals' approaches to accountability and accountability policy orientations. Some principals and district directors experience dissonance when they encounter the managerial, bureaucratic manifestations of accountability, such as increased reliance on standardised testing of

students as an improvement indicator. These tensions contribute to low policy fidelity and suggest that school review does not necessarily lead to school improvement. School self-assessment, on the other hand, is perceived to be instrumental in bringing about improvement to student achievement. Low achieving schools encountered significant barriers to successful School self-assessment and reported additional resourcing as a desirable outcome of school accountability processes. The study reveals that a further barrier to the implementation of accountability policies was the nature of change management and a perception of increased scrutiny and system insistence on compliance, regardless of the needs and nature of a school.

Finally, this research has implications for the design and implementation of accountability policy and processes in Western Australian public schools**.** Based on this research, further studies in the area of school accountability focused on the role of other school leaders in accountability processes, would expand current understandings. Furthermore, cross-sectoral responses and comparisons between primary and secondary schools would augment knowledge about the implementation of school accountability policy. Further investigation of the role accountability plays for the State's most disadvantaged schools would be advantageous.

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Glossary

DET	Western Australian Department of Education and Training (Name adopted in 2003)
DOE	Department of Education
EARS	Education Assessment Reporting Software
EDWA	Education Department of Western Australia (Name adopted in 2001)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OFSTED	Office of Standards in Education
OSF	Outcomes and Standards Framework
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DEST	Department of Science and Training
MSE	Monitoring Standards in Education
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TEE	Tertiary Entrance Examination
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
WALNA	Western Australia Literacy and Numeracy Assessment

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