

**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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**Abstract**

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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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## Chapter One: Introduction

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Being accountable for the cognitive development of hundreds of children and young people is without doubt a challenge and a privilege and this is what faces 769 principals in Western Australia employed by the Department of Education and Training. The principal is “the person in a school who must accept ultimate responsibility for what happens” (Gurr, 2008, p. 5) and the pivot upon which policy, and its enactment by teachers, turns. Accountability processes that do not promote student achievement and wellbeing or that distract principals and their staffs from the work they do, run counter to the interests of future generations.

Accountability in public school systems is of interest around the globe and the Western Australian Department of Education and Training’s school accountability policy replicates attributes shared by other Australian states and other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. Accountability has existed between governments and schools since an exchange of service for payment and funding began. However, the accountability of interest in this context is educational accountability, concerned with student performance as an indicator of teacher, school and system performance (O’Day, 2002). This study seeks to investigate how principals and district directors of public schools in Western Australia understand the nature and purpose of centrally mandated school accountability processes, in an era of increasing scrutiny, changes to accountability policies and public surveillance of school performance. In particular, the study examines ways in which schools implement the

accountability policy of the Department of Education and Training. The eyes of principal educators in schools and directors enacting school accountability processes provide perspectives and points of view on accountability and the extent to which the enacted processes achieve the stated purposes of the Department of Education and Training's policy.

As an employee of the Department of Education and Training in a number of schools and a district office, I noticed variation in the way district directors conducted school reviews. One district director commented on the school's self-assessment of the school's performance. Another director in another school commented on the narrow range of data available to prove the school's self-assessment but was not able to suggest appropriate tools. Yet another school review involved an employee from the district office visiting instead of the director. The stand-in district director conducted the visit efficiently with few probes to examine the school staff's reasons for its self-assessment and no reference to the level of student achievement. These experiences and the frequent changes to the Department of Education and Training accountability policy led me to question the purpose of school accountability and seek explanations for the variation in the approaches of district directors.

### **Research Question and Approach**

Through this study, I ask how **school self-assessment** and **school review**, the two major aspects of school accountability in the Western Australian public school context, impact on the practices of educators to bring about improvements for students. The answers to this central research question are important to educators engaging in the processes and

work associated with accountability. Principals of schools are the primary audience for accountability policy, while district directors are the employees appointed to validate schools' effectiveness. Teachers, students and parents all have roles and interests affected by accountability policy and involvement to some extent. If school improvement, encompassing improved student achievement, is the purpose of accountability, it matters that the processes and practices associated with accountability contribute to its aims. Throughout this thesis, 'the Department' refers to the Western Australian Department of Education and Training. Similarly, the acronym DET connotes the Western Australian Department of Education and Training.

Whilst there is extensive literature describing accountability and factors that lead to school improvement, the impact of accountability policies in Western Australian public schools is relatively unexplored. Strickland (2003) investigated the perspectives of key stakeholders on school accountability policy in Western Australia. He found that school accountability processes were onerous for stakeholders and recommended changes to encourage participation for improvement purposes. This study expands on Strickland's examination of perspectives of stakeholders on school accountability to scrutinise the effects of school accountability from the perspectives of employees upon whom the responsibility for implementation rests. I investigate principals' and directors' understandings of the nature and purpose of school accountability processes. This study incorporates the views of both principals and district directors about school accountability to examine congruity between principals' and district directors' views.

I approach this study with the intention of discovering more about principals' and district directors' perceptions of the effects of accountability in schools. This leads to an interest in discovering the degree of fidelity between policy and practice and the extent to which principals and district directors converge in their understanding of accountability processes. Ultimately, the matter of interest is whether the accountability policy leads to school improvement and benefits for students. As an employee of the Department, I have first hand experience of accountability processes and this piques my interest in the experience of others. My experience of accountability as a principal and deputy principal in several schools in Western Australia is useful to this study, lending knowledge of policy, hierarchical structures and an appreciation of the variation of school contexts. I also bring my own conceptual knowledge to the matter I investigate so I endeavour to maintain a stance of enquiry and suspended subjectivity. I undertake to examine my own experience in the light of others' and use the diversity of perspectives as impetus for further analysis.

### **Definition of Terms**

I use the term **school accountability** in this study to refer to the obligation of principals to give an account of their schools' performance to a district director, the super ordinate representing the employer. Writers in the field of school accountability sometimes distinguish between '**accounting**', gathering, organising and reporting information that describes performance and '**accountability**', the *conversation* about what the information means and how it fits with everything else known, and about how to use information to make positive changes (Earl & LeMahieu, 1997). The difference between the two terms and whether principals and directors interpret school accountability as

accounting or accountability is fundamental to this study. Regardless of the interpretation and the policies under which they operate, schools remain accountable. Variation between schools occurs in relation to the "...specific 'form' of accountability, which is commonly influenced by policy" (Elmore, 2005, para. 3).

Accountability mechanisms are, literally, the variety of formal and informal ways by which people in schools *give an account* of their actions to someone in a position of formal authority, inside or outside a school (Elmore, 2005). However, the Australian Oxford Dictionary (Moore, 2002, p. 9) gives a definition of accountability as "the concept that public organizations...are accountable to the public". The sense in which I use school accountability, with reference to Western Australian public schools, is consistent with giving an account to someone in a position of formal authority rather than to the public. The discussion surrounding educational accountability indicates there is a range of interpretations and meanings for school and education system accountability. Furthermore, education systems cite accountability to the public as a reason for accountability to formal authorities (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2005a). Systemic accountability mechanisms rely on the assumption that people will act on the results any such mechanisms produce, capitalizing on the strengths and addressing the weaknesses in an attempt at improvement (Baker & Linn, 2004).

**School self-assessment** is the term used by the Department to indicate processes whereby schools 'reflect on and evaluate their performance in order to plan for and enact improvement' (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2008a, p.3).



School **self-evaluation** is discussed by various authors (Canovan, 2002; McNamara, O'Hara & Ní Aingléis, 2002; Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005) with reference to comparable processes. In some cases, the word **internal** replaces **self** to denote school-based judgements of performance. Typically, system authorities provide criteria or continua to assist schools in making judgements about their performance. In 1997, the Department, then known as the Education Department of Western Australia, used the term **self-evaluation** and referred to district directors validating schools' judgements (Western Australia. Education Department of Western Australia, 1997). Use of the word **external** in relation to school evaluation indicates evaluation by personnel either external to the school and school system or external to the school. The Western Australian **school review** and **standards review** are forms of external review to the extent that district directors, who conduct school reviews, are not school-based. The Department employs them, as it does school-based educators. The terms **self-assessment** and **school review** both gained currency in Western Australia public schools in 2002 with the publication of *'The School Accountability Framework'* (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2002). School review in the Department has been the prerogative of district directors since the creation of these positions to replace the inspectorial role and position of superintendents.

The corporate governance policies and organisational structures of the Department apply to all public schools in Western Australia and provide a coordinated public school '**system**'. Each public school is accountable to a district director through the principal and each district director accounts to an executive director. The executive directors and the director general perform the executive functions of the Department and form the key

decision-making and direction-setting group of employees for the Department. In addition to district directors, school oriented directorates exist with functions such as standards and moderation, schools resourcing and so forth. Non-school based employees are located in district offices or at the central office in Perth, Western Australia. The policies and processes governing the work of all the employees of the Department make up the 'system'. I use the term 'system' to denote the legislation, policies and processes of the Department, which pertain to schools, central and district offices involved in the education of students from Kindergarten to Year 12.

### **School Accountability in the West Australian Public School Context**

The Government of Western Australia administers and funds public schools through an education department, named variously in the last century according to the changing responsibilities and portfolios of the Minister for Education. According to a chronology of the Department (personal communication, June 22, 2008) compiled by S. Banks, the creation of the office of Minister of Education dates from 1890 when the government department known as the Education Department administered the public school system. In 1988, the Department became the Ministry of Education (MOE). In 1994 the Ministry of Education was redesignated the Education Department of Western Australia (EDWA) (personal communication, June 22, 2008). In 2003, the State Government announced the consolidation of the Department of Education and the Department of Training under the Minister for Education. The Department then became the Department of Education and Training (DET).

During the last decade, the Western Australia Department of Education and Training embarked on an extensive agenda of change to the way school performance is monitored, similar to education systems in Australia and other developed countries (Earl, 2005; Gurr, 2007). Changes to educational accountability reflect a growing political concern with efficiency, productivity and accountability (Lam, 2001), all of which are associated with economic rationalism and attempts to improve economic productivity. Economic rationalism is consistent with the philosophy of the new managerial approach to accountability (Ehrich, Cranston & Kimber, 2004) and when applied to education, seeks to bring about cost efficient reform (MacNeill & Cavanagh, 2008). These reforms target school level change (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999) and this can be seen in the ongoing changes to accountability captured in the Department's policies.

The Department of Education and Training in Western Australia predicated its Accountability Policy (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2002) on the expectation that school self-assessment and school review processes would facilitate school improvement (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2005a). The accountability policy acknowledged that schools can "only be held accountable for factors over which they have control" emphasizing that schools are accountable for maximizing the difference they make in terms of student outcomes (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2002, p.6). During 2006 and 2007, the Accountability Policy (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2002) and associated frameworks (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2005b; Western Australia. Department of Education and

Training, 2007) were extensively reviewed (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2008b) culminating in a new accountability policy, School Improvement Accountability Framework (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2008a) and supporting publications. In 2008, the Department introduced an 'Expert Review Group' into accountability for schools and the school review became known as a standards review (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2008a). As the term suggests, the review of schools focuses on the standards of student achievement. The district director's review role has become progressively more specific in focus with each successive policy revision.

Western Australian public schools, of which there are approximately 770 in an area of 2.6 million square kilometres, are currently organised into districts and allocated a district director who reports to a member of the Department's executive team. District directors are responsible for school review and principals' performance management. They are expected to "provide expert, independent verification of ...each school's analysis of its performance and practice" (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2005a, p.1). In addition to validating each school's self-assessment and providing advice and support to schools, district directors make judgments about a school's effectiveness and report school performance to the executive directors of the Department (Albones, 2005).

Some accountability mechanisms are *internal* to schools (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999). School self-assessment or school self-evaluation is one such internal mechanism that has been integral to accountability policies for Western Australian schools (Western

Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2008a; Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2008b). The *School Improvement and Accountability Framework* of the Western Australia Department of Education and Training continues the tradition of school self-assessment with the statement:

Schools assess using a systematic, continuous and comprehensive process that focuses on student performance and progress. This involves gathering and analysing data and other evidence and making judgments about the standards of student achievement and the effectiveness of school processes and operations (2008a, p.6).

A school self-assessment guide, *School Performance: A Framework for Improving and Reporting*, was introduced in 1997 (Western Australia. Education Department of Western Australia, 1997). School self-assessment was one of the key processes in subsequent accountability policy documents. Schools continued to use this framework when the *School Accountability Framework* of 2002 (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2002) and *School Review Framework 2005-2007* (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2005a) were introduced. The 2002 framework refers to the 1997 framework in anticipation that schools might continue to use it, although it ceased to be 'essential' (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2002, p.10).

The framework of 2005 provided performance indicators against which principals could prepare statements and evidence to present to the district director. The framework articulated eight outcomes, the first of which was "the school improves student performance based on the analysis of quality data gathered about standards of student achievement" (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2005a, p.3).

This outcome became the single focus for school self-assessment from 2008. The other outcomes, used prior to 2008, were “the school delivers learning experiences that are outcomes focused and responsive to the needs of students”, “the school offers a safe, caring and inclusive learning environment”, “school leadership is committed, responsive and collaborative”, “school staff are motivated, engaged and competent”, the school’s “financial and physical resources are managed to optimise learning outcomes for students”, “the school operates in partnership with the community” and “the school responds to the strategic directions of the Plan for Government Schools 2004-2007” (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2005a, p.3).

The concomitant process integral to accountability policy is school review. School review is an internal accountability mechanism carried out by district directors with each school in each district. The process generates a report that employees of the Department and perhaps the school council, comprising parents, share between themselves. The change from school review to standards review was ushered in with a new document detailing revised parameters. However, standards review is akin to the school review in procedure and intention (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2008a). While these two reviews are similar, this study is primarily concerned with school review and does not examine the reviews or procedures of the Expert Review Group.

District directors examine the information and summaries presented by school staffs and discuss the information with the principals and other staff who meet with directors when they visit schools. District directors determine the proceedings of a school review visit,

to whom they speak and the questions they ask. Following the visit, a school's principal receives a copy of the findings and recommendations of the district director. The recommendations might include actions to be undertaken and these are the subject of subsequent reviews by the district director.

Public schools in Western Australia have not experienced punitive sanctions and consequences such as school closure or re-staffing, associated with poor student achievement in the United Kingdom (Ylimaki, Jacobson & Drysdale, 2007) and the United States (Louis, Febey & Schroeder, 2005). Developments in Western Australian accountability policy such as the instigation of an 'Expert Review Group' and the publication of its reports on the internet echo international educational accountability trends.

The nature of accountability in Western Australian public schools, as in other OECD countries, focuses on outcomes rather than inputs (Hanushek, 2005). In other words, principals and their staffs are responsible for what students achieve rather than the opportunities provided to students. The emphasis on data, measuring progress and achieving standards has coincided with an emphasis on standardized testing. Like accountability systems elsewhere (U.S. Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service, 2002), accountability in Western Australian public schools focuses on the school as the unit of reporting student performance, which is reported in relation to criteria or standards established by the Department. The Department's criteria are influenced by the Federal Government's legislation related to funding for schools and associated requirements of schools.

System level measurement of student performance commenced in 1990 with a random sampling test program for students in Years 3, 7, and 10 (Hamilton, 2004). This testing program is 'Monitoring Standards in Education' (MSE). The term also refers to the sets of assessment materials used to measure student performance in a range of learning areas, including Science, Society and Environment and The Arts. Whole population measurement of student performance commenced in earnest in 1999 with state-wide testing called Western Australia Literacy and Numeracy Assessments (WALNA), which were assessments of student achievement in literacy and numeracy for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Like MSE, these assessments were standardised with a range of psychometric measures applied to promote reliability and validity to the data. One of the features of WALNA was a 'benchmark', the achievement level agreed with other states that indicated the minimum achievement required for a student to continue making progress for each of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Benchmarks were set for each of the four learning areas tested: Numeracy, Writing, Reading and Spelling.

The Department used standardised WALNA data extensively to make judgements about school level performance as well as system level performance. The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) replaced WALNA in 2008 and serves the same purposes at state and national levels. Furthermore, the Department began to publish aggregated WALNA results on the internet for each school, thus complying with the requirements of the *Schools Assistance Act 2004* (Australian Government, 2004). Specific software was developed by the Department to assist schools in determining how well students had achieved on test items, how the school had performed in comparison



to similar schools (by relative disadvantage), and how sub groups of students, such as girls, performed in comparison to the state, similar schools or other sub groups.

Department employees refer to these software applications as '*Data Club*', '*EARS*' and '*First Cut*'. The attention to data is consistent with attempts to make interpretation valid and accurate, two enabling conditions for recipients of the data to take action towards improvement (Baker & Linn, 2004).

School level measurement of student achievement was further emphasised with the introduction of The *Outcomes and Standards Framework* for all public schools in Western Australia in 2005 (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2005b). Among the aims of this publication was "parents can have confidence that the judgements made by one teacher... are comparable to the judgements of another" (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2002). The Department advocates data analysis of particular groups of students to inform school improvement planning from 2002 in the *Accountability Framework* (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2002). The *School Review Framework 2005-2007* stipulates that a school with poor processes which is not adequately improving student performance will require intervention and support to become effective (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2005a).

This study is set in a context of increasingly formal judgments of school and student performance and the interest in whether schools are improving student performance. The two system mechanisms of school self-assessment and school review are integral to this emphasis on measurement. Principals' responses to these mechanisms provide

information about accountability policy implementation, principals' understanding and reactions to policy and insights into perceptions of its impact on student performance.

This study seeks to add to the knowledge about educational accountability by investigating local applications of a global trend. Specifically, I explore factors that mediate the implementation of policy in the Western Australian context and identify some assumptions made by policy makers in the Department including a tendency to assume cross-school similarity in policy relevance, shared aspirations by school communities and tolerance for failure measured by policy specified definitions.

This study contributes to the understanding of the transition from policy to practice by examining the understandings and reported actions of two groups of key employees in the Department: principals and district directors, the reviewed and the reviewer. The congruity and diversity between these groups provides insights into the mediating effects of experience, location, student-body characteristics and personal efficacy of district directors and principals. Perspectives from those with diverse experience illuminate the policy variations and deviations implemented by educators in enacting the prescriptions of accountability policy processes. The junction between policy stipulation and reported effect provides further insights into both the possibility of effectiveness of accountability policy and its efficacy in contributing to school improvement.

### **Overview of Thesis**

In this first chapter, I examined the recent Western Australia Department of Education and Training policy directions for public school accountability. I discussed two of the four aspects of school accountability relating to the years 2005-2007: school self-

assessment and school review. Two other aspects of the Department's school accountability policy, **schools plan** and **schools report**, reputedly document each school's response to its self-assessment and summarise its achievements. I did not select these aspects for examination as this was beyond the scope of this study. School documentation introduces additional considerations such as alignment between documentation, teacher practice and policy. These issues are tangential to my focus on principals' and directors' perspectives. Introducing documentation has the potential to skew interviewee responses toward congruence with their schools' planning and reports. This discussion examined the accountability policy, some school implementation contexts and comments of the perceived effects this implementation has.

The following chapter examines the literature associated with school accountability in a global context. In addition to political changes influencing the requirements of schools, a number of agendas are associated with school accountability such as standards, comprehensive reform, school self-evaluation or self-assessment, school effectiveness and school improvement. The chapter examines the purposes of accountability and the implications accountability policies have for student achievement.

In the third chapter, I describe my research approach and the methodology of sampling data collection, analysis and representation. I present demographic information relating to schools, principals, directors and student cohorts along with a discussion of the qualitative orientation of the research. The data collected appear in the fourth chapter in the form of short narratives that represent the recurrent, significant and in some cases unique contributions of principals and directors through semi-structured interviews. This

approach provides context, illuminating the variability of experience and response and captures both recurrent themes and diverse responses to school self-assessment and school review.

The final chapter examines the data in the context of the literature about school accountability. I present the findings of the study along with the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

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### Overview

Underpinning recent educational reform and increased accountability in school systems is the assumption that educational accountability leads to school improvement. This chapter deals with the implications of this assumption and the features of educational accountability regimes. This chapter examines the extent to which this assumption is accurate in particular circumstances. In debating whether increased accountability leads to improved performance, this discussion examines the role of principals in implementing accountability policy. This chapter also argues that the nature of accountability processes, and the tools relied on to measure improvement, are critical considerations in determining whether accountability improves school performance. Two processes integral to public school accountability in Western Australia are of interest here: school self-evaluation, or school self-assessment, and school review.

This chapter proposes that the accountability policy of the Department of Education and Training in Western Australia is an example of a global trend amongst OECD countries towards greater accountability of educators for the achievement of students.

Furthermore, the managerial nature of current accountability trends, building on the bureaucratic tradition of public organisations (Ehrich, Cranston & Kimber, 2004), contrasts with a past emphasis on the professionalism of educators in schools. This leads to an examination of the features of accountability mechanisms in public school systems in both Australia and other OECD countries. This chapter concerns the implementation

of system policy and the conditions under which policy implementation occurs successfully. Conditions include the circumstances of schools and the responses and commitment of key educators to systems policies.

The Australian Federal Government, like its international counterparts, promotes an Australia-wide agenda for education. Recent changes to accountability for Western Australian public schools align closely to this agenda making an examination of accountability practices and their anticipated outcomes timely. Tensions arise with change emanating from perceived discrepancies between policy and practice. Dissenting positions amongst educators about who should be accountable to whom and about what lend further complexity to these tensions. These tensions reveal the assumptions underpinning accountability policy. Of particular interest to this study are the tensions experienced by principals and directors who play critical roles in implementing the Department's accountability policy. The extent to which these people support or detract from the success of accountability measures is important in the success of the policy to promote improvement in student achievement.

### **Educational Accountability: Purpose**

The first assumption underlying the adoption of accountability systems is that education relates causally to economic growth (Codd, 2005). The belief the future labour market will comprise highly skilled, productive human capital because of better education outcomes predicated the essential argument advocating improvement in educational achievement. Governments act from the belief that education systems must be responsive and accountable to the needs of the economy. Education system "...reform

agendas are associated with efficiency, productivity and accountability, the three principles that sustain economic rationalism” (Lam, 2001, para. 37). The number and extent of education reforms around the globe suggests there is an ongoing belief that the school systems are broken and, therefore, need fixing (Vaughan, 2002). Whatever the impetus, there is global correspondence in the way governments are seeking to address the issue.

The second assumption is that adopting accountability-premised systems brings about improvement in the learning and achievement of the future workforce. Determining the cause of improvement in student achievement is always problematic however. An examination of the literature of school improvement suggests that faulty attribution is an inherent difficulty in determining the extent of school improvement because there is significant distance from the instructional input to the measurement of outcomes (O’Day, 2002). The issue of attribution when it comes to student achievement or non-achievement is the holy grail of school improvement.

Schools are not controlled conditions and therefore are problematic when attempting to determine the specific cause of changes in student performance. Just because one policy change preceded a change in student performance does not mean that there was one and only one force acting on the students (USA. Council of Chief State School Officers, 2005, p. 14).

Not all educators are convinced that accountability-premised systems bring about improvement in student achievement; there are further questions to answer.

### **The Global Context: System Reform**

This millennium, state-mandated, performance-based accountability systems have become increasingly evident in public school systems such as those of the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The accountability models adopted by education systems in these countries share features such as an emphasis on standardised test outcomes, curriculum reform and in some cases sanctions and rewards for success in tested achievement. Individual countries and self-governing states or provinces have passed key legislation to enable these reforms to schools and usher in system-wide accountability policies. Some systems have introduced marketisation whereby parental choice of school and devolved responsibilities to principals and parents determine the school's governance and promote palpable accountability to parents.

The United States Federal Government passed the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* in 1994, an attempt to reform education on a national scale. This legislation built on the gathering momentum of the standards movement, and offered grants to the states, contingent on their development of standards and assessment systems linked to these standards (Superfine, 2005). The *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001* (USA. Department of Education, 2001) superseded this Act, in a further attempt at national reform to standards-based education with accountability mechanisms mandated to ensure its implementation (McDermott, 2007; Superfine, 2005). This 'standards movement', central to US federal and state policy-making since the early 1980s, has involved comprehensive curriculum frameworks, standardized testing programs,



increases in teacher qualifications, and the introduction of 'benchmarks' for continuous improvement in student learning outcomes (Louis, Febey & Schroeder, 2005).

Changes across the Atlantic had already commenced; the English reforms were ushered in with the 1988 Education Reform Act (Ylimaki, Jacobson & Drysdale, 2007). The aftermath included decentralised management, devolved funding to some schools, testing of students and the public reporting of their achievements, national curriculum frameworks and a focus on standards (Caldwell & Spinks, 1998). The Government introduced a national literacy and numeracy strategy along with additional funding for students with special needs. The self-managing schools in England are accountable through the centralised Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). Aggregated student performance on standardised tests is public, as are OFSTED reports about individual schools. School self-evaluation coexists with external inspection as part of the accountability regime. The stakes are high; if they determine it warranted, OFSTED inspectors have the power to close or reconstitute schools.

In New Zealand, changes to government policies, in what Codd (2005) describes as neo-liberal reform, brought about self-managing schools. These changes date to the early 1990s. New Zealand's schools feature parental governance through a Board of Trustees with strong centralised accountability. Significant changes to the financing of schools occurred, along with the introduction of Teacher Registration. Curriculum Frameworks replaced syllabi, which separated the outcomes of education from the processes. The increased marketisation of schools and heightened profile of education has had the additional impact of attracting full fee-paying students from other countries (Codd,

2005). The reforms described here as neo-liberal bear a strong resemblance to reforms elsewhere in the developed world, albeit labelled differently.

Similar phenomena occurred in Canada, sometimes under the descriptor neo-conservative (Lam, 2001) on a province-by-province basis. Like the reforms in New Zealand, significant changes to curriculum and assessment policies, a mandated College of Teaching (teacher registration) and changes to the administration and financing of schools were made in the 1990s (Leithwood, Steinbach & Jantzi, 2002). Uniform student reports aligned to curriculum and assessment policies were mandated. The National Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) was established in 1995, charged with developing large scale student assessments following extensive public consultation by a Royal Commission for Learning. By 2007, every province and territory in Canada, with the exception of Prince Edward Island, administered some form of large-scale student assessment (Volante, 2007).

Ireland published a Framework for school evaluation as recently as 2003, *Looking at our Schools*. School evaluation based on this publication began in 2004 (McNamara & O'Hara, 2006). Interestingly, the basis for Ireland's educational accountability at the time was cooperation and negotiation between the 'social partners'. This model was "perceived to preclude invasive inspection or appraisal of professionals in their workplace, and required all change to proceed only after the achievement of consensus" (McNamara & O'Hara, 2006, p. 565). The Irish approach to accountability is the reason for the country's relatively late adoption of a bureaucratic or managerial model of accountability. The Irish experience of educational reform lends support to the

suggestion that the impetus for the current accountability trends lies very much in the political and economic arena.

Reform has not been confined to developed countries where English is a first language. Elsewhere in the developed world, the Netherlands national government ordered schools to implement a common core curriculum for the first three years of secondary education in the late 1990s. Simultaneous reform was required for the final three years. The Netherlands implemented a new core curriculum for junior secondary requiring changes in both curriculum content and forms of instruction for all secondary years (Geijsel, Slegers, Leithwood & Jantzi, 2003). Other European Union countries are moving to adopt accountability policies attuned to those already mentioned here (McNamara & O'Hara, 2006).

Developed nations around the world have changed the way their education systems operate. The demand for suitably qualified workers drives national and state governments to implement reforms they believe, rightly or wrongly, will achieve this goal. These reforms are characterised by standards, or national standardised testing and curriculum change. School self-evaluation and the restructure of schools along the lines of market driven supply and demand has also occurred in some developed countries (Lubienski, 2005). Changes to the accountability of schools are particularly significant, being the means of exercising control over educators and thereby, supposedly, their practice. The goal of improving student achievement is integral to school accountability measures in these public school jurisdictions, and Australia too is reforming its school sector.

### **The Australian Context**

Public schools account for the majority of students in Australia, the administration of which is a state or territory responsibility. The political structure of Australia includes State and Territory jurisdictions united by a Federal Government. Primary schools cater for students from age four to 12 or 13 when students commence secondary schooling. Each state and territory determines its own curriculum, school configurations, starting age and policies. While state and territory governments are responsible for funding public education, the Federal Government funds a range of recurrent programs, estimated to total \$8.7 billion (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), which have become integral to many schools' operations.

The *Schools Assistance Act 2004* and subsequent legislation required school authorities to comply with elements intended to strengthen reporting and accountability (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008). Federal funding became contingent on compliance with reporting student achievement and other factors and, using this advantage, the Federal Government achieved state and territory cooperation with its reform agenda. Developments include an Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), which is working on a national curriculum for 2011 and beyond as part of a reform agenda (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2009). ACARA collects data from schools for the purpose of accountability and reporting, research and analysis, and resource allocation.

A number of reform movements have preceded the current systemic reform across Australia (Freeman, 2008). Large-scale curriculum reform programs in Australia took

place in the 1960s. Then in the 1980s, research on school improvement and educational change led into the school effectiveness and accountability movements of the 1990s. These recent reforms to Australian public education in the 1990s emerged initially at state and territory level (Ylimaki et al., 2007). There were calls for Australia to implement a transparent system of accountability in public education (Rich, 2000). Rich criticized Australia's lack of a systematic and comprehensive report on individual school achievements. She advocated the public sharing of information about student achievement. Underpinning Rich's recommendation was the assertion that releasing comparative data to the public would encourage schools to improve the academic performance of students. Further arguments favouring public disclosure of school achievement included empowering the public who pay for government schools, informing parents, informing the education debate, and research and policy-making (Rich, 2000).

As each state and territory operates and funds its own public education system, a number of differences are evident in delivery, content and reporting or accounting for educational performance in each state or territory. Each Australian state and territory has an accountability framework, a requirement for a school plan, which is determined by the school, and must produce an annual report (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2006a). There are elements of school self-assessment in all states and territories, although the areas they cover vary and the degree of school discretion over assessment tools varies around the country. Most states and territories have a form of external school review or inspection. Two states, Tasmania and Victoria, have an internal review system, that is, review conducted by a person or people

employed within the system (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2006b). The introduction of Expert Review Group by the Department in Western Australia moved public schools closer to an external review model in 2008 than has previously been experienced by public schools. Other states and territories have variations of external review whereby the reviewers are either external to the school organization or the school system. Most of these approaches allow for considerable flexibility and states and territories use their own terminology when referring to school accountability and processes.

Like other educational systems in the developed world, the Australian reforms focus on standards, system-wide standardised testing, curriculum change, school performance evaluation and increased ‘transparency’ of reporting to the public. Reform has led to preoccupation with accountability at the expense of teaching and learning, role discontinuity and the intensification of work for principals (MacNeill & Cavanagh, 2008). The McKinsey report, in its examination of school systems, concluded that a combination of monitoring and effective intervention is required to achieve consistent, effective instruction in a school system (McKinsey & Co, 2007).

Recently the Australian Federal Government announced a number of initiatives designed to ‘nationalise’ key aspects of public education including curriculum (McMullen, 2008) and accountability. The Federal Government required all states and territories to adopt new reporting standards for all parents in 2005. A National Curriculum aims to achieve uniform standards across Australia (Ylimaki et al., 2007) and a common starting age by 2010 was muted, with funding contingent on this and a range of other conditions,

including nationwide testing. Goals of further uniformity emerged with suggestions of an Australian Certificate of Education for final year secondary students (Nelson, 2005a), and a National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL). The latter is to develop national performance benchmarks and professional development programs for principals, school leaders and teachers (Nelson, 2005b). In 2000, the Federal, State and Territory Governments had agreed to national literacy and numeracy testing for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, which came to fruition in the form of the NAPLAN in 2008. A further direction was a nationally and internationally recognised system for academic standards of students completing Year 12 (Nelson, 2005a). Furthermore, Nelson announced that Federal Government funding to schools would become contingent upon the publication of information including literacy and numeracy benchmark performance, teacher attendance, teacher retention, participation in professional development, student attendance, value added, median year 10 and 12 results and school leaver destinations (Nelson, 2005b).

The philosophy of the new managerial or neo-liberal approach to accountability, which aims to create more efficient and cost-effective school administrative structures, is influential in Australian school reform (MacNeill & Cavanagh, 2008; Meek, 2001). Governments pursue this goal through the implementation of an administrative-control form of site-based management that increases school site administrators' accountability to the central, district or board office for the efficient expenditure of resources (Lam, 2001).

Some education professionals raise concerns about aspects of the new accountability mechanisms implemented in public school systems. Publishing student achievement results, such as national testing, on a school-by-school basis is one aspect of the new accountability. This leads to “the public interpreting the results at face value and attributing kudos to the successful schools and blaming those who do poorly” (Angus, Olney, & Ainley, 2007, p. 32). Arguments against the release of student achievement data also contest the degree to which teaching influences school outcomes, and warn that standardized assessments only cover selected aspects of student learning. Opponents of publishing aggregated test results contend that effective school improvement is undermined and misleading portrayals of school quality result from the publication of student achievement data (Government School Education Council A.C.T., 2004). Opponents further suggest that schools might manipulate their outcomes, small schools might distort the picture and a number of further undesirable outcomes would be attendant on the inevitable league tables that would eventuate (Government School Education Council A.C.T., 2004). NAPLAN and the development of a National Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2009) continue to be accompanied by continuing cynicism from educators about the use of data.

There is considerable uncertainty among principals and teachers over where the national assessment work is heading in the long run. The deliberations are occurring without reference to them. The Commonwealth Minister for Education has proposed the linking of student assessments to performance payments to teachers and principals and of tying government grants to school performance (Angus et al., 2007, p. 29).



The Commonwealth Government uses ‘the power of the purse’ to target funding to its priorities. This ensures compliance by the states and territories (Angus et al., 2007). Furthermore, the various reforms agreed by the Australian Governments were underpinned by the *National Goals of Schooling for the Twenty-first Century*, agreed to by all governments in 1999 (Angus et al., 2007). The *Melbourne Declaration* (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2008) supersedes the *National Goals* of 1999 but articulates continuing national rather than state directions for Education. Purse-string control is explicitly detailed in the *Schools Assistance (Learning Together – Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004 and Regulations (2005)*. This act ushered in state and territory compliance with the Federal Government’s accountability measures, including reporting to the public of the aggregated student achievement results for state and territory-wide literacy and numeracy assessments. These funding conditions heralded intensification of the monitoring of student achievement and school staff performance.

In summary, Australian public education systems are implementing a range of measures to bring about increased accountability to both the Federal Government and respective state or territory governments. Like other developed countries around the world, Australia has introduced educational standards, as achievement benchmarks, and a national testing program has commenced. School self-assessment is a feature of accountability policies to some extent in all states and territories. School reviews are predominantly internal, carried out by employees of the state authority. There is considerable variation amongst the States and Territories however, in an environment of continuing change.

### **Educational Accountability: Improving Student Achievement?**

The school improvement and school effectiveness traditions inform accountability systems and the move to greater accountability for educators. Although associated with each other, school effectiveness and school improvement theories arise from separate traditions and emphases (Leonard, Bourke & Schofield, 2004); school improvement focuses on school and classroom processes whilst school effectiveness has offered a range of sophisticated models (Gunter, 2001). School improvement intends to bring about change toward desired goals and is therefore concerned with both policy and practice whilst school effectiveness focuses on research and theory development (Creemers & Reitzig, 2005). School improvement results, say those in the field, occur as the outcome of a school's effectiveness (Scheerens & Demeuse, 2005), thus, consecutive causality apparently exists. Effectiveness in an outcomes-oriented school context is the state of affairs when students are "able to achieve, in a wide range of endeavours, at a level consistent with their potential" (Cresswell, 2004, p. 3).

In the last decade, the merging of the two traditions is evident, not least because they are enshrined in political goals (Gunter, 2001). In a project merging the two traditions, Creemers & Reitzig (2005) delineate an effectiveness criterion as student outcomes, whilst their improvement criterion was a school's capacity to manage change. One of the criticisms levelled at the effective schools literature is its failure to outline practical ways schools can bring about improvement and success (Desimone, 2002). The educational effectiveness research identifies basic cognitive skills as the output criterion in measures of school effectiveness (Creemers & Reezigt, 2005). The focus on literacy and numeracy

in accountability-driven systems is a logical outcome of this tradition, as any accountability system measuring school effectiveness has to rely on a limited range of performances and measures. Therefore, the most critical and measurable 'achievements' are selected to the detriment of cultural, moral and aesthetic outcomes and measures of student achievement (Ranson, 2003).

Information is the currency of accountability, with its inherent contestability about the form it should assume, how to use it, and how it will become varied by the people who receive and transmit it in concordance with their knowledge and skills (O'Day, 2002). Expressing student achievement as a commodity or numerical expression of achievement is at once reassuringly 'scientific' and reduces student achievement to a universal equivalent (De Lissoy & McLaren, 2003; Pignatelli, 2002). However, the United States experience under the *No Child Left Behind* legislation and continuous improvement targets have resulted in a range of instructional practices which are not consistent with educational research findings of requirements for genuine student engagement, understanding and long term progress and achievement (McTigue & Brown, 2005). Where the assessments have high-stakes associated with them, there will be an increase in teaching to the test (Resnick, 2006) leading to reductionism associated with achievement standards. Elmore and Fuhrman (2001) agree that this may be an outcome of 'high-stakes' accountability where sanctions and rewards accompany the outcomes of student testing.

The phenomenon of public reporting of student achievement and school performance is evident in education systems where so-called neo-liberal or neo-conservative reforms

have occurred (Mintrop, MacLellan & Quintero, 2001). Whilst assessments address the need for information, the issue of attribution remains problematic. Mutual adaptation is a feature of large complex organisations such as public education. Accountability policies usually attempt to address the need for information but neglect the information required to attribute successes and failures appropriately (O'Day, 2002). The OECD and other organisations publish data that facilitate international comparisons of tested achievement (MacBeath, 2008), highlighting levels of attainment and enabling comparison of education systems around the globe. At national levels, public denigration of a school's reputation is likely to give rise to a collective response rather than individual reflection and may see a collective retaliatory and aggressive response to the feedback (Louis, Febey & Schroeder, 2005). This type of reaction effectively hinders the implementation of a policy. There are calls however, (Angus et al., 2007) for a clear statement from the *Ministerial Council On Education, Employment, Training And Youth Affairs* (MCEETYA) to stipulate the role and limitations of the national assessment results due to the variety of ways they are employed.

### **Measuring Improvement**

Accountability policies inherently assume that the tools they recognise to measure student achievement are authentic and accurate (Fuhrman, 2004). This is a matter of psychometrics, seldom understood by the public, educators and consumers of student achievement data. Should agreement occur about valid and reliable measurement tools, there is still the difficulty of what to measure with all the implications associated with curriculum ownership, priority and purpose. Another underlying assumption about standardised testing regimes in accountability driven education systems, is that the

standardised test results are useful for dual purposes. School-based educators can supposedly use the information to help them in improving student performance. At the same time, the data indicate the sufficiency of the students' levels of achievement and, by default, the adequacy of the school's instructional program (Doran, 2003).

McDermott (2007) refers to 'data' culture' whereby teachers use standardised test results to inform themselves of areas of effective and ineffective performance.

Value added analysis has arisen as a means to isolate the school's influence on students' learning from other variables. There are several approaches to value adding, ranging from gain score comparisons to more complex statistical operations. Such operations attempt to calculate the effects of variables thought to influence students' learning.

Doran (2003) cautions that any model claiming to measure value added by the school must reflect the multivariate nature of data, correlated observations accounting for unreliable data through design or statistical correction and must use a statistical model.

Some educators view value-added models, which separate the influences of schools from other influences such as family backgrounds (Nathan, 2005), as a fair measure of school effectiveness. This is because they supposedly demonstrate the effect schools have on students whose achievement remains low in comparison to the 'standard' expected. In other words, "success is more a measure of growth and effort than of performance" (Roberts, 2006, p. 55). The significance of these issues is whether school accountability systems hold schools accountable for school effects or school-and-context effects.

The argument for value-added measures of improvement captures the distinction between ‘achievement’ and ‘improvement’ (Brown & Ing, 2003). Even the use of the term ‘improvement’ conveys assumptions and requires further definition. Defining what constitutes sustained improvement is likewise contestable. Criteria might include the number of years over which improvement is evident, the tool or measure of improvement used and how the definition of improvement will make a significant difference to the measurement of schools’ progress (Brown & Ing, 2003). This is crucial to the whole notion of improving schools and determining if schools are in fact getting better at helping students achieve.

### **Achieving Change, Accountability or Compliance?**

An increasingly bureaucratic, managerial emphasis is evident in educational accountability policy as governments attempt to enforce their quest for improvement (Lam, 2001). Attempting to inculcate change by devising new ‘rules’ or mandating policy may be unsuccessful because the normative structures of schools can preclude their implementation (O’Day, 2002). Louis, Febey and Schroeder (2005) point out that it is by no means clear whether strong external accountability regimes improve student achievement in schools. There is some support for this outcome in the short term, but no evidence that improvement is sustainable.

Managerial, bureaucratic accountability empowers each level of the hierarchy to direct and evaluate the performance of the people in the tiers below him or her. Such mechanistic structures (Scheerens & Demeuse, 2005) have limited use in bringing about meaningful change or improvement to teacher practice. These approaches to

accountability epitomize the assumption of centralised accountability systems that significant degrees of control are required to bring about the lowest acceptable level of implementation (Lee & Wong, 2004). Furthermore, there is an overt approach to goal setting and planning improvement. Bureaucratic or managerial accountability assumes individuals will direct their efforts to organisational goals. However, in schools, the interests of some staff members are not served by alignment to school goals and thus political activity is stimulated (Scheerens & Demeuse, 2005) and individuals pursue alternate goals in their own interest.

Particular accountability resides with the school principal, who performs both a managerial function and a leadership role in schools. Typically, the school principal will report to the district director or next level up in the hierarchy. This resembles the standards approach being 'top-down' and having a mandated change agenda. Similarly, the accountability relationship is ultimately to the government. O'Day (2002) advocates a balance between bureaucratic and *professional* accountability for improving schools. She cites the nature of professional accountability as focused on the work of teachers that would be professional in orientation, based on professional judgment but employing multiple indicators and assessments over time. Goldspink (2007) rejects any management approaches to school improvement in favour of local approaches to improvement that involve relationships of trust.

In contrast to bureaucratic or managerial approaches, oriented to control (Codd, 2005; Sachs, 2001), professional accountability fosters trust by recognising an ethical obligation to account. An assumption fundamental to this approach is that accountability

is achievable through those with professional knowledge and ethics. A professional approach is consistent with a view of education as a moral and ethical endeavour whose practitioners collectively aspire to embody values and ethics. Professionals owe accountability to colleagues in systems indicative of a professional approach (Normore, 2004). This type of accountability promotes practice moderated through peer networks, organisations and bodies with an emphasis on promoting student welfare and developing the capacity of educators. The professions of law, medicine and religion operate in this manner (Finn, 2002), articulating their standards of practice and assuming through membership of professional bodies, responsibility for the definition and enforcement of those standards (O'Day, 2002).

Accountability systems of a bureaucratic-managerial nature target schools as the unit of change (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999) in most cases, assuming that this will bring about changes to individuals' teaching. In other words, accountability policy makers assume they can make organisations change by mechanisms external to the organisations (O'Day, 2002). However, these external forces, such as the policy-making group of an education system, are not always successful at bringing about change. Whilst the combined action of individual educators is necessary for policies to be effectual, Louis, Febey, and Schroeder, refer to a "prevalent assumption that groups are the most effective unit of change if the goal is to alter the educational system" (2005, para. 12). There are suggestions (Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002) that situations define rather than affect practice and implementation of learning or change. Furthermore, these authors claim that implementation is the interaction between the many people and situations involved in



the process of change. Elmore summarises policy effects, suggesting that “policies refract through schools like light through a prism” (2005, para. 14).

The extent to which actions by educators result in school improvement and how individuals are motivated to act towards improving their school, is integral to the success of accountability policies (O’Day, 2002). Alignment, the cohesion between individual practice and collective expectations and action, is a necessary response for school improvement to occur (Elmore, 2005). This can occur when school personnel believe they have agency or control over the outcomes for their students. MacBeath (2008) points to the individual agency of teachers as controllers of their own practice and having influence on the structures that seek to contain them.

Teachers experiencing change initiatives required by state-mandated accountability measures either ignore, sabotage, adapt, or adopt them (Borman, Kromrey, Hines & Hogarty, 2002). Staff members, who view improvement initiatives as an affront to their sense of professional efficacy, are likely to resist change (Leithwood, 2005) so teacher professional development is a key factor in the adoption of school reform policies or systemic efforts to improve student achievement (Desimone, 2002). Desimone recommends specific and structured guidelines, which will result in faster adoption by teachers and make teachers more inclined to take up curriculum teaching strategies. However, there is research to suggest that the individual teacher’s expertise will influence the relationship between prescriptive-ness of guidelines and implementation of strategies for improved teaching (Desimone, 2002).

Trusting others generates trustworthiness whereas the antithetical nature of bureaucratic and managerial accountability creates untrustworthiness and a diminution of responsibility (Codd, 2005). Hence, the monitoring of employees can result in systematic creation of untrustworthy employees. The nature of a moral endeavour is such that guiding principles and ethics determine the course of action, which is advantageous and consistent with moral purpose. Managerial accountability systems sever the connection with ethical principles, leading to cognitive dissonance when conflicting imperatives arise: on the one hand, the moral course of action, on the other, the lawful directive of the employer. Subjugation of moral purpose to enforced rules will not succeed where moral purpose is the essence of the endeavour (Codd, 2005). In their discussion of ethical clashes Cranston, Ehrich and Kimber (2006) note that the adoption of managerial policies are oppositional to policies based on care and learning. They argue for strong leadership to build ethics into the policies and practices of institutions such as schools.

The leadership of the school principal is critical to bring about school-level change as the link between policy makers (bureaucrats) and policy implementers (teachers). Where school leaders make sense of policy to teachers, giving them opportunities to make decisions about how the implementation will occur in the school, there can be a significant positive effect on teachers' beliefs (Codd, 2005). Along with providing resources to implement the initiative, this will influence teacher motivation to adopt and work towards implementation goals (Leithwood et al., 2002). Positive emotional arousal, arising from the expectation of personal goal fulfilment, is an important

motivating state for teachers to participate in particular actions (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

### **Gaining Commitment: Convincing the Workforce**

Many experienced teachers continue to be oriented to professional accountability and feel indignation when confronted with accountability enforced through the hierarchical organisation of the Department, which potentially involves sanctions and rewards. In addition to the credibility of the measurement 'tools', the meaningfulness of the information generated by any accountability system is subject to reinterpretation by the receivers - school and system personnel who may have unequally distributed skills and knowledge (O'Day, 2002). There is some evidence that teachers believe themselves accountable primarily to their students and parents (Leithwood et al., 2002).

Furthermore, implementation of accountability or improvement policies is likely to be superficial when teachers perceive a discrepancy between their goals and those of the government (Leithwood et al., 2002). Elmore and Fuhrman (2001, para.16) point out that "policies themselves are not designed to account for the complex reactions that occur in schools and school systems".

Teachers are increasingly cognizant that data out of context, without professional judgment are not particularly relevant to them in their teaching (Blackmore, 1999). The cumulative nature of experience implies that successive negative experiences will undermine motivation to implement new initiatives, or in the words of Leithwood and Jantzi (2006, p. 206), "many experienced teachers have developed negative context beliefs over their careers as a consequence of being associated with mismanaged or ill-

conceived innovations”. School-based and other educators might argue for school performance information to improve learning and focus on educative practice in student settings. Teachers are, in fact, highly motivated to engage in activities to do this (Leithwood et al., 2002). However, these considerations potentially challenge the successful implementation of change.

One of the paradoxical outcomes of imposing a control-oriented model of accountability on a workforce aspiring to professionalism is diversion of time and effort from the exercise of educating. Harmful instructional practices identified with standardised testing and standards for student achievement (McTigue & Brown, 2005) include overly broad or overloaded curricula, which omit to specify what is essential for all learners to understand. Attempts by teachers to cover the breadth and scope of every standard in case they are ‘tested’, generic worksheet-based activities for students that familiarise students with test procedures and formats, and a reductionist approach to teaching are also harmful practices that may occur. There is also the possibility that processes concentrating on particular learning will lead to a decrease in the range of teaching strategies and organisational variation (O’Day, 2002). A reduction in the affective or comprehensive nature of education may also result from such a narrow focus (Leonard et al., 2004), due partly to teachers allocating more time to preparing students for assessment and acquiring tested skills and knowledge (Lashway, 2001). Additional criticisms extended to widespread standardised testing in accountability regimes that leads to a narrowing focus of curriculum, the limiting impact of paper and pencil type tests and the lack of emphasis on other performance measures associated with broader curricular areas (Riffert, 2005).

External means are not the only way to inculcate school improvement and are not always successful at bringing about change (Louis, Febey & Schroeder, 2005). The 1990s, in particular, saw the ascension of self-evaluation or self-assessment for schools in OECD countries (McNamara & O'Hara, 2006). There is a substantial history of self-evaluation or self-assessment used to encourage schools to improve themselves, often combining internal and external mechanisms. Self-evaluation can be seen as either a product or a process and at one extreme “self-evaluation is little more than inspection delegated to schools themselves” (MacBeath, 2004, p. 86). Gross and Goertz (2005) voice the concern of researchers and policy makers that without significant assistance external to schools, despite the threat of sanctions, the generation of resources, knowledge and skills may not be possible.

School self-evaluation was contemporaneous with the system-mandated focus on inspectorial quality assurance by an external body in England (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005). There is an inherent contradiction in a school trying to become a learning organization but responding to external mandates and strict guidelines (MacBeath, 2008). Learning organizations by definition are always challenging their own premises and ways of being. “The paradox of agency is that in the context of a top-down cascade of government initiatives, reaffirmation of teachers’ experience is paramount. It is the prime source of knowledge on which a learning organization both rests and moves forward” (MacBeath, 2008, p. 145). The role of self-evaluation in English schools became increasingly central to school accountability this century as a parallel system of internal self-evaluation by schools, coexisting with external evaluation, shifted to a

*sequential* form of school self-assessment or evaluation. This self-evaluation was followed by external evaluation; the external evaluators use schools' self-evaluation as a basis for the external evaluation, which is part of a cycle of review and planning.

*Cooperative* self-evaluation is a proposed variation of focus (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005). This entails external agencies cooperating with schools to develop a common approach to evaluation.

A dichotomy is evident as there is an emerging trend to encourage schools to self-improve in England (Plowright, 2007) and Australia (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2006b). Policy makers continue to exert pressure on schools to accelerate levels of student achievement. However, the current emphasis in the field of school improvement is to build the capacity of schools to improve through self-evaluation, distributed leadership and participation (Willoughby & Tosey, n.d.). Yet school leaders are accountable for the implementation of the policies regardless of the policy consequences for students (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). In the United States and England, failure to make adequate progress against performance goals can precipitate administrative sanctions (Superfine, 2005).

National governments use power overtly in their attempts to implement accountability policies. According to policy attributes theory, organisations such as education systems that engage in implementing accountability policy (Desimone, 2002; Epstein, 2005) can predict how successful policy implementation will be. The key policy attributes of specificity, consistency, authority, power and stability are predictive of successful policy implementation. For lasting policy implementation, policies that are authoritative and

work through persuasion rather than coercion are required. Policies implemented through power last only as long as the sanctions or rewards continue (Desimone, 2002).

Authority and power are distinct from each other (Borman, et al., 2002). Legislation or consistency with social norms conveys authority to policies. Expert knowledge can make a policy authoritative as can support, or promotion by charismatic leaders. Power, on the other hand, is associated with the sanctions and rewards the policy is able to deliver. This is significant for the standards movement; “we will need authoritative policies - policies that appear legitimate to educators and parents - not just those that carry powerful consequences” (Resnick, 2006, para. 28). Research around the implementation of accountability policies generally suggests, “The more specific, consistent, authoritative, powerful, and stable a policy is, the stronger will be its implementation” (Borman et al., 2002: para. 4).

*Specificity* refers to the degree to which curriculum frameworks and guidelines are detailed, have supplementary publications, sequence and pacing guidelines. In the last decade, the Department has introduced a number of accountability frameworks, each describing outcomes, giving guidelines and making statements about school planning, school self-assessment and school review, and recently standards review. *Consistency* is the extent to which policies contradict or reinforce each other. There has been increasing consistency between accountability policy, curriculum and reporting over the last decade, but the pace of change has been exponential with numerous policy revisions and obsolescence. This lack of stability presents a challenge for strong policy implementation by the Department.

*Stability*, the extent to which people, circumstances and policies remain constant over time, is essential where sustainability is required. Schools need to be stable to implement policies effectively. For example, Gross and Supovitz (2005) recommend that the policies should have longevity, giving schools sufficient time to understand and implement them. Leithwood contends:

Change is possible without stability but improvement is not. Indeed, by definition, unstable schools are in a constant state of change. But much of that change is unanticipated and often quite dysfunctional. Improvement, in contrast, requires a foundation which allows for the effects of a series of typically modest but successful interventions to accumulate over time until they amount to noticeable gains in students' learning. Stable school leadership is a crucial ingredient in such accumulation and this requires coherent district transfer policies and practices. (2005, para.14).

In fact, externally originated accountability is not a proven means to sustained improvement (Louis, Febey & Schroeder, 2005).

School self-assessment or school self-evaluation, as it is frequently termed, is an example of an accountability initiative many schools use because it encourages broad support and involvement from teachers. There are a number of positive effects associated with school self-assessment (Plowright, 2007), which contribute to school staffs improving both their teaching and student learning. Effective school self-evaluation potentially heightens awareness amongst teachers about the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning in their own classrooms and across the school (Neil & Johnston, 2005). There is some evidence that school self-evaluation or self-assessment is helpful when it facilitates teacher ownership and goal setting (O'Day, 2002; Gopalan & Weinbaum, 2000). Embedding, ownership of self-evaluation processes



in school practice, inculcating thorough understanding of the purpose of the activities by all involved and allocating time for the processes is essential to success (Neil & Johnston, 2005). The critical issue for schools engaging in self-assessment or self-evaluation is whether this focuses on the effectiveness of teaching and its relationship to student achievement (Gopalan & Weinbaum, 2000; O'Day, 2002).

School leaders, who facilitate teacher decision-making, give teachers a connection to their intrinsic motivations by helping them acquire a sense of direction. They also assist teachers to appropriate a connection between externally originated initiatives for change and the school's mission (Leithwood, et al., 2002). Where the moral purpose of teachers is diminished, such as when there is a shift to motivational goals inherent in high-stakes reforms to education, teachers "may behave in a more controlling manner and be less effective in teaching their students" (Leithwood et al., 2002, p. 100). There is some evidence for supporting intrinsic motivation over extrinsic motivation amongst teachers and some suggestion that intrinsically motivated teachers are more likely to stimulate intrinsic motivation in their students than those who are not (Leithwood et al., 2002). The relevance of teacher behaviour, attitudes and motivations to this study lies in their connection to the work of principals, all of whom, in Western Australian public schools, were teachers originally.

In an evaluation study of 16 self-evaluating schools across nine Local Education Areas in England, Neil and Johnston (2005) identified a number of positive outcomes. School cultures changed; there was increased openness to exploring different methods of evaluating practice in the school, sharing of good practice, encouragement of

professional development, and training for teachers occurred. School heads acquired a framework within which to organize change. There was greater ownership of the self-evaluation activity among school staffs because they developed their own self-evaluation agendas. There were resource packages provided to reduce unnecessary reinvention and this encouraged inter-school communication. There was also improved school community involvement and feedback.

When school self-evaluation is successful, it is embedded in the daily practice of staff, its purpose is clear and understood by all and teachers have sufficient time to undertake the activities. Furthermore, the culture of the school supports the development of skills integral to the process: analysis, reflection, communication and collaboration. These findings by Neil and Johnston (2005) emphasise that honest self-reflection is prerequisite but must be followed by action to achieve improvement goals. A progression to increasingly rigorous processes is also important over time in the development of a school self-evaluation culture. A tension between external accountability mechanisms and internal school self-evaluation exists and remains unresolved. External inspection and honest disclosure by schools are unlikely bedfellows, no matter the political or cultural context in which they operate (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005).

The degree to which accountability systems generate and focus attention on relevant information determines the impact of school accountability policies. Relevance includes the relationship of information to teaching and learning and to changes in that information as it continually cycles through the system (O'Day, 2002). Another measure

of success is the degree to which the implementation of policy motivates educators to attend to relevant information and to action change as a response. Determining whether the policy and its implementation develop the knowledge and skills to promote valid interpretation of information and appropriate attribution of causality at both individual and system level is another factor in gauging policy success. So too is the capacity to allocate resources to areas of most need. If accountability policies aim to change the behaviour of individuals they must hold them accountable for that which they can control (Normore, 2004).

The concept of control or agency is crucial to one proposed way of bringing about school improvement through accountability. If accountability is thought of in terms of the repertoire of responses schools are able to marshal in answer to external pressure, attention can be directed to factors that influence school responses (Elmore, 2005).

Unlike attention aimed at determining compliance with policy (fidelity), attention to schools' responses encourages resourceful, capable actions by school personnel, which is consistent with collective and aligned action. Achieving the latter requires internal accountability: "the level of conformity among educators' conceptions of responsibility, the organization's collective purposes, and the degree to which educators believe they influence or exercise agency over student learning" (Elmore, 2005, para. 11). Internal accountability is thus consistent with school self-assessment and the privileged, expert knowledge accumulated by educators who reject compliance mechanisms as a means for ensuring improvement.

The capacity of external review for providing feedback to teachers that changes their practice is limited. There has been increased emphasis of school self-assessment in English schools because the inspectorial model limits the utility of the feedback given to teachers. In general, the OFSTED feedback did not influence teacher practice nor did it foster skills in self-evaluation (Neil & Johnston, 2005). OFSTED acknowledges the benefits of self-evaluation for schools, which include shared vision building, rallying support, communication, involving more stakeholders and building the type of relationships that are helpful for sustained action (Neil & Johnston, 2005). Creemers and Reezigt suggest, “ideally, schools ... define their own improvement needs, design their improvement efforts, and evaluate them as to whether those needs have been met.” (2005, p. 409).

Whole school reform is the most evidentially promising response to student failure indicated by achievement targets (Leithwood, Jantzi & McElheron-Hopkins, 2006). However, action guided by school improvement planning is a very common response to concerning student performance, although there is not a lot of evidence relating to its effects (Leithwood, et al., 2006), suggesting further investigation is warranted. School reform rests on a number of assumptions about how organisations change the important aspects of learning and the reliability of the tools selected to measure improvements in student performance. When systems hold schools accountable for context effects, over which they do not have control, considerable debate ensues around the likelihood of accountability policies achieving their stated aims.

Schools with students from lower socio-economic intake communities are frequently associated with poor student achievement and factors, which make improving these schools more difficult than non-disadvantaged schools (Reynolds, Harris, Clarke, Harris & James et al., 2006). Other studies have determined a link between the socio-economic status of schools and their capacity to respond positively to external accountability requirements. In fact, there is some evidence that the performance of low socio-economic schools can decline more under external accountability than internal systems (O'Day, 2002). The distinguishing characteristics of low socio-economic schools that improve, documented by O'Day, are the capacity for peer-collaboration, trust between teachers and collective responsibility for student learning. Peer collaboration and trust between colleagues supports the flow and use of information necessary for improvement. Reynolds and colleagues (2006) report that for improvement to occur in schools facing exceptionally challenging circumstances, context specific interventions are most likely to bring about improvement. These authors argue that the most challenging schools frequently have very different characteristics from each other.

The impact of state accountability policies on narrowing the achievement discrepancies between lower socio-economic students and the more advantaged is debatable. A study into the impact of state accountability systems found those policies offering support to schools tended to focus on professional development related to curriculum and instruction, rather than resources (Lee & Wong, 2004). They suggest that those forms of support will be more successful when adequate resources are already in existence. Lee and Wong (2004) also note that accountability policies were primarily a means of regulation, rather than support. They assert that the States' adoption of accountability

policies cost no more or no less in relative terms to the previous practice and there was no significant change in achievement for minority and lower socio-economic groups of students.

### **Chapter Review**

Changes to education systems have been pervasive and far-reaching over the last two decades. This has created tensions about accountability's purpose and veracity for educators. The economic imperatives for nations such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Great Britain and other OECD countries have instigated reforms to ensure that future workforces will be available. Reforms to curriculum, students' assessment and schools' accountability have been the means to achieve future economic growth.

Australia's states, including Western Australia, have all embraced various degrees of reform with most having some form of self-assessment alongside either an internal school review or an external review of school performance. The Australian Federal Government has insisted on a number of reforms including a national school starting age, benchmarks or standards against which students are tested, curriculum reform and increasingly public reporting of individual school performance. In mandating a number of reforms, the Federal Government has brought its power to bear, threatening financial sanctions to states that do not comply.

The question of whether managerial, bureaucratic accountability can bring about change culminating in improvement is vexed but crucial. Educators contest the reliability and purposes of the inevitable standardised system-wide tests, such as NAPLAN, and other measures of student achievement and school performance. There is a range of

approaches; the Western Australian standardised tests provide a value added analysis, allowing for school context. Some systems have used unsophisticated gain scores and the like to indicate student progress. School self-assessment has accompanied some of the state mandated reforms. Because it potentially encourages teacher ownership and goal setting and can focus on teaching and learning, school self-assessment can lead to school improvement. The bureaucratic-managerial nature of the current accountability systems is problematic nevertheless, because it can lead to the antithesis of its stated intention.

This chapter has explored some of the factors affecting schools' responses to external pressure from performance-based accountability systems: the level of conformity among educators' conceptions of responsibility, the organization's collective purposes and the degree to which educators believe they influence or exercise agency over student learning. Analysing and categorising the issues is useful to examine the paradox of bureaucratic organisational goals and structures intended for implementation in schools, by a workforce with a professional orientation. Recent studies of accountability in Western Australian public schools do not examine tensions and articulate the issues around this particular categorisation. However, the extent to which principals and district directors perceive this tension is of interest in the present study.

### **Chapter Three: Research Methodology**

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#### **Purpose**

This study investigates how principals and district directors of public schools in Western Australia understand the nature and purpose of school accountability processes. In particular, I explore accountability processes, commonly referred to as school self-Assessment' and 'school review' contrasting these with principals' and directors' perceptions of the extent to which the school accountability policy of the Western Australian Department of Education and Training is implemented in schools. The study seeks to consider the influence of school accountability on student outcomes and school improvement and suggest areas for improvement. In this chapter I describe my choice of methodology to explore school accountability processes, rationale for participant selection, choice of data collection method, analysis and treatment of the participants' experiences, beliefs and opinions relayed to me in the course of this study.

#### **Qualitative Orientation**

This study uses a qualitative framework and incorporates the influence of phenomenological considerations. While I endeavour to describe particular experiences of accountability, I am interpreting each individual's experience in the context of accountability in education systems (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). This framework is suited to exploring social issues and processes (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005) such as those involved in school accountability for public schools in Western Australia. Social processes are social transactions or human interactions, mediated orally and in recorded forms but originating from and destined for receipt by individuals.



Accountability processes are primarily an issue of human capacities and contributions of individuals relative to each other for that which they are accountable. The subjectivity of qualitative approaches (Penzhorn, 2002) allows exploration of the individual experience of shared or similar phenomenon.

I examine differences of experience that emerge to gain insights into the phenomenon, potentially leading to an improvement in understanding of that phenomenon (Rocco, Bliss, Gallager & Perez-Prado, 2003). The capacity of qualitative research to acknowledge complexity and ambiguity is significant and the phenomenological approach contributes the capacity to ascribe meaning in contexts (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). I explore how the participants in the study have understood a phenomenon and what this phenomenon means for them in diverse contexts. I do this in order to understand the meaning of school accountability in Western Australian public schools (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006).

My choice of a qualitative approach to this study is consistent with my goal to understand the phenomenon of school accountability, as experienced by a number of educators. Whilst I attempt to represent others' experiences faithfully as is consistent with phenomenology (Horn, 1998), my involvement with the processes studied is inextricably linked to my interpretation of others' subjective reality. I acknowledge that this inevitably means my inquiry will be value laden, as all inquiry must be, arising as it does from an inquirer's interests and applying an inquirer's interpretation of what is noticed (Burke, Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Furthermore, I base my interpretation on a conceptualisation formed by my professional knowledge, beliefs and previous

experiences (Cepeda & Martin, 2005) in addition to my reading and analysis of relevant literature.

### **My Perspective as Researcher**

My work as a school administrator leads me to infer that school accountability practices do not always match policies and frameworks of the Department of Education and Training. I have noted changes to policies concerning school accountability since my employment commenced with the Department. My beliefs reflect experience as a school administrator in New Zealand and Western Australia. I disclose my perspective and involvement knowing that this is important to readers who wish to evaluate my conclusions (Barker & Pistrang, 2005).

As a principal and deputy principal, I have experienced the processes as they occur in schools and are conducted or responded to by the principals in my study. I empathise with these principals and I share their use of jargon, documents and processes. On the one hand, this assists me to interpret the subjective realities of the study's participants. On the other, my emotional-intellectual engagement could constrict my interpretation to the confines of my own subjectivity and biases. To combat this, I adopted a neutral tone when interviewing participants and suspended my instinctive reactions to interviewee responses when I analysed each interview. My heightened consciousness of my own beliefs encouraged me to apply additional consideration to responses that were different from those I would have given and to responses that I had not anticipated.

I knew a number of interviewees either through previous collegiate contact, formal professional relationships or as acquaintances. I was conscious initially that the absence of anonymity might constrain some participants from offering frank perspectives and opinions. Similarly, I mused on the possibility that principals and directors with whom I had had no previous contact and with whom I am unlikely to have further contact, might feel constrained by my anonymity and be hesitant to accept my integrity at face value. This did not appear to be a concern to principal participants, who were forthright in their views. However, one of the participants was particularly vague in most responses and persistently deviated from the questions asked. The responses suggested the principal was uncomfortable with discussing any personal role in accountability processes and I elected to disregard much of the data collected from this participant. Director participants were more circumspect; in two cases, interviewees were careful to obscure the identity of schools and principals. I interpreted this as lending additional credence to their responses.

### **Research Design and Techniques**

I wanted to explore the role of school accountability in Western Australian public schools, the nature of accountability and the impact it has on school performance. I selected the two aspects of the accountability processes that involve interaction between educators as a focus: school self-assessment and school review. These processes are of interest because they cannot occur without the involvement of the principals and district directors. School self-assessment involves at least a principal and a district director who conducts school review. More frequently, school self-assessment extends to staff in other promotional positions and teachers. I did not focus on documentation in part

because planning documents and reports may not reflect interactive processes. Such inquiry would augment the scope of this study significantly and beyond its current parameters.

Both school planning and annual reporting, although part of school accountability, might detract from my focus on the experience of school accountability and distract principals into areas such as congruence between documentation and rhetoric. They do not contribute new information about the accountability of schools but summarise and make information available to an audience beyond the school. School planning documents are a response to school performance, an integral process in a school's self-assessment, but I decided to focus more narrowly on the implementation of processes here. The experience of processes and the enactment of critical roles within them provide complex, subjective recounts (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2007) of the experience of accountability.

The integrity of policy implementation, the tension between professional and bureaucratic purposes of accountability and the capacity of schools to improve served as further supplementary foci for this study. Policy documents give a rationalisation for the processes they stipulate. I wanted to explore the veracity of policy and contrast policy with practice. I anticipated the experience of policy implementation might reveal a number of tensions experienced by educators; and these tensions might revolve around educator beliefs about the purpose, nature and intent of accountability. The capacity of schools to respond to the information accountability processes provide is a further avenue for investigation in this study. Each of these frameworks is important to a study

of accountability policy as the school accountability literature indicates they are critical to the ability of accountability policy to bring about improvement in schools.

### **Sample Selection**

The sample represents diverse experience in school type, size and location. My choice of purposive sampling (Silverman, 2006) was consistent with my aim to explore the particular features of accountability processes in the Western Australian Government school sector, as I chose participants who are integral to these processes. I selected participants from among two particular groups of the Department's employees- principals and directors- having regard for their locations and experiences. I deliberately included a higher proportion of principal participants than director participants as there were proportionally more principals than directors employed by the Department, approximately one district director to every 33 principals. The ratio in my sample is one district director to five and a half principals. Each principal is able to recount experiences of accountability in a school context that is different from another school but directors describe their practice across a geographic district containing a number of schools. Employees belonging to these groups are critical participants in the accountability processes by virtue of their roles.

I selected a purposive approach to sample selection in the hope that participants with diverse experience in a range of locations would generate varied perspectives, concerns and accounts of their experience of accountability in Western Australian Public Schools. The sample can also be considered a sample of convenience; my awareness or knowledge of some participants' professional background, current and previous

locations and experience was helpful in ensuring the sample was diverse. The use of telephone and e-mail for communication was also a matter of convenience for both participants and me.

I used the Department's public web-based resource 'Schools Online' to identify prospective principal participants and the demographics of the schools they worked in. I also requested and received a spreadsheet from Central Office describing each school's demographic descriptors. Each school is described according to the relative advantage or disadvantage of the students in its intake area by decile rankings from one through to 10 based on socio-economic indicators (SEI). SEI deciles are relative to other schools and are indicative of the social and educational issues schools may encounter. SEI, derived from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, have five dimensions: education level of parents, parent occupation, Aboriginality, income and single or two-parent family.

I selected three principals who worked in Decile 10 schools for inclusion in the sample. These schools generally have poor student performance on tested achievement. I expected these principals' experiences might be similar to each other and included these principals because the performance of such schools is problematic in discussions of school accountability and performance. Purposive sampling in this manner is consistent with the qualitative research tradition, which may designate some cases of a phenomenon as of greater interest or importance (Mahoney & Goertz, 2006), assuming theoretical knowledge of the field of inquiry and an array of existing understandings.

Based on the number and nature of enrolments, the Department classifies public schools in Western Australia into four major levels. For example, Level 3 schools number 100 pupils or fewer whilst the largest primary schools by enrolment and senior high schools are Level 6. Various combinations of the number of students enrolled and the year groups the school caters for determine each school's level nomenclature. The principals I selected worked in schools with a range of classifications. There were two Level 6 schools, four Level 5 schools, three Level 4 schools and three Level 3 schools. One of the Level 3 principals was a novice principal while a Level 4 principal was in a second year as such. Five of the principals received appointments to their current school within the two preceding years and all but the novice principal had been line managed by more than one district director since their initial principal appointment.

Most of the principals I selected for this study had worked as principals in a number of schools and brought a range of experience to their present positions. The school locations of the principals at the time of interview spread across Western Australia; five of the schools were either within the Perth Metropolitan area or in a regional centre of city proportions. Three of the schools were remote and three were in country centres. Three of the schools were district high schools, which enrol students from Kindergarten to Year 12. Two were secondary schools and the remainder were primary schools. Kindergarten in Western Australia commences in the year students turn four and a half and is a part-time program. Both kindergarten and the following year, pre-primary, are pre-compulsory years with students required to remain at school until the year they turn 17. One of the participants was principal of an education support school, catering for students with disabilities, and three of the schools had high proportions of Indigenous

students. The following table summarises the demographics of the participants and their schools.



**Table 1****Principals and their School Demographics**

<b>Principal</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years as Principal</b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>School Level</b>	<b>School SEI</b>	<b>Decile Ranking</b>	<b>Location</b>
1	M	10+	District High School K – Yr 12	6	101.53	5	Country
2	M	10+	Senior High School Yr 8 – 12	6	97.88	7	Country
3	M	3-5	District High School K – Yr 12	5	72.93	10	Remote
4	F	1	Education Support School Yr 8 – 12	3	91.31	9	Country
5	M	10+	Primary School K – Yr 7	5	99.86	5	Metropolitan
6	M	10+	Primary School K – Yr 7	5	114.17	1	Metropolitan
7	F	1-2	K – Yr 12	4	61.81	10	Remote
8	F	10+	District High School K – Yr 12	5	81.28	10	Remote
9	M	10+	Primary School K – Yr 7	4	109.34	2	Metropolitan
10	M	10+	Primary School K – Yr 7	4	98.79	6	Metropolitan
11	F	10+	Primary School K – Yr 7	5	98.97	6	Metropolitan

*Note.* From Department of Education and Training Western Australia: Semester 1 2007.

**Table 2**

**Proportions of School Locations in Sample Compared to WA Public Schools'**

**Locations**

	Metropolitan	Country	Remote
WA Public Schools	74%	20%	6%
Sample Schools	55%	18%	27%

*Note.* From Department of Education and Training Western Australia: Semester 1 2007.

**Table 3**

**Proportions of Male and Female District Directors and Principals**

Employee Group	Male	Female
District Directors in DET	63%	37%
District Directors in Sample	50%	50%
Principals in DET	60%	40%
Principals in Sample	64%	36%

*Note.* From Department of Education and Training Western Australia: Semester 1 2007.

**Table 4**

**Principals in Sample by School Level Compared to all DET Principals**

	Level 3		Level 4		Level 5		Level 6	
Proportion of DET Schools	21%		24%		33%		16%	
Proportion of Schools in Sample	9%		27%		45%		18%	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Proportion of DET School Principals	36%	64%	65%	35%	69%	31%	66%	34%
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Proportion of Principals in Sample		100%	67%	33%	60%	40%	100%	

*Note.* From Department of Education and Training Western Australia: Semester 1 2007. In addition to the number of principals appointed permanently at the respective levels in DET schools, there were 12 female non-permanent principals and 1 male non-permanent principal. Some districts also had school principals in District Office roles.

Of the 14 participants, three were directors, two of whom had experience in conducting school reviews in at least two districts. By noting the appointments and relocations of district directors in my role as a school principal, I was aware that both district directors had previous appointments as district directors. This information was widely available through the electronic services available to the Department’s employees and a topic of conversation in collegiate circles. One of the district directors was acting in a Central Office director role and had extensive prior experience in the public service. I was aware

of this through my employment prior to the selection of participants for this study. The nature of this director's role concerned student standards of achievement, and made the participant's perspective relevant to my study. Of the directors, all had regional experience in the last five years and two spent time in proximity to Central Office, located in Perth, during that time. One of the directors was female. The inclusion of directors provides scope to investigate diverse experiences of school accountability processes and gain insight into the perspective of individuals who review schools' judgements.

The perspectives of the two groups, principals and directors, which emerged during the course of my study, are both convergent and divergent between and within both groups. Divergent perspectives or deviant cases (Silverman, 2006) among the sample allowed for greater variance in the data collected.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews permit researchers to build interpretive understanding of the interviewees' subjective perspectives. In-depth interviews are advantageous to qualitative inquiry for their capacity to allow lengthy and deep examination of research questions and participants perspectives (Given, 2006). In the flexible tradition of qualitative data collection (Barker & Pistrang, 2005), I chose to use semi-structured interviews to gather information from participants, the flexibility offered by interviews being particularly beneficial (Vockell, 1983). Although I had prepared interview questions, in the course of the interview, participants sometimes digressed from the original question. The perspectives they related illuminated their experiences of accountability processes,

beliefs and practices and on some occasions diversions afforded greater insights than the planned question may have. Taking advantage of the flexibility semi-structured interviews offer, I frequently refocussed when the participant pre-empted a question and elaborated beyond my framed question. I hoped to maximise the opportunities for in-depth insights to emerge and avoid the 'rigor assumption' (Shank & Villeda, 2004), such that too much pre-planning may diminish the potential of the study. This is the quintessential nature of inductive analysis; the research causes changes to questions and generates new questions (Riessman, 1993).

I approached all but one of the participants by telephone, outlining my research and requesting an interview. I requested participation of one participant in-person and subsequently conducted the interview face-to-face. Following telephone conversations requesting interviews, I e-mailed participants information and sought consent in the same manner. I conducted all but one of the interviews by telephone and each interview was tape recorded with the participant's informed consent. At the start of each interview, I asked each person about his or her professional experience, current and previous roles and length of tenure where this was unknown to me. One of the benefits of these types of questions is that they tend to be non-threatening (Burns, 1994) and so assist in putting the interviewee at ease. Where I was unknown to the participant, the tape recording lent some anonymity and the possibility of increased frankness and honesty in responses (Vockell, 1983).

Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and I e-mailed each participant a transcript of his or her interview to peruse for accuracy of transcription. This also gave

participants an opportunity for confirmation and further contextualisation of their responses. Furthermore, participants had the opportunity to satisfy themselves that I had sufficiently obscured their identities to preserve anonymity. In achieving fairness to all participants, I reworded some questions, spontaneously responding to participants and probing for additional information with questions such as “can you tell me more about...?” and “you said... could you expand on that...?” where participants had given exceedingly brief responses.

Telephone interviewing was a pragmatic choice; my employment in a number of regional areas of Western Australia throughout the length of time I have been engaged in this research limited my interaction with colleagues and the ease with which I could conduct face-to-face interviews. Whilst taping interviews enhances the reliability of this study (Sanders, 1982), one of the disadvantages of the phone interview is the loss of body language and facial expression. As a means of compensating, I listened for nuance, tone of voice, hesitation and other characteristics of conversation when I replayed and transcribed each interview. Taping the interviews also satisfies a need for low inference descriptors (Silverman, 2006) to improve the reliability of qualitative research.

Consequently, I was careful to transcribe each tape recording verbatim.

I designed two sets of semi-structured interview protocols: questions for principals and questions for directors. The protocols for both groups commenced with their view of what constitutes an effective school, as an open-ended introduction designed to assist participants to orient their thoughts. The questions aimed to elicit information from the participants about their views on school accountability, its purpose and success in

achieving that purpose. Their answers provided information about their experience, practice and expectations of school accountability. Principal and director responses also revealed their knowledge of the issues and, in probing, I gained further responses about principals' and directors' behaviour and experience in implementing accountability processes.

**Semi-structured Interview Protocols for Principals**

1. In your opinion, what is an effective school and how do you define effective?
2. What do you believe makes a school improve? How would you know if your school improved?
3. What do you think the purpose of school self-assessment is for government schools in WA?
4. What happens in your school in relation to school self-assessment?
5. How do your actions in relation to school self-assessment fit with prescribed procedures or processes for all public schools in WA?
6. To what extent do you think school self-assessment makes a difference?  
To whom?
7. What advice would you give:
  - i a new principal about school self-assessment?
  - ii a district director conducting school review?
  - iii the Director General?



### **Semi-structured Interview Protocols for Directors**

- 1 In your opinion, what is an effective school and how do you define effective?
  
- 2 What do you believe makes a school improve? How would you know if a school improved?
  
- 3 To what extent do you think school self-assessment makes a difference?  
To whom?
  
- 4 What advice would you give:
  - i a new principal in relation to school review?
  - ii a district or area director conducting a school review?
  - iii the Director General?

Like the principals' interview protocols, the first question sets the scene and orients the participant to the topic of the interview. The second and third probes elicit the opinions and beliefs of directors, who make judgments concerning schools' effectiveness, about the school review process. The final questions give participants an opportunity to summarise their reflections through recommendations for improvement to school accountability. These questions gave participants an opportunity to describe aspirations for improvements to the accountability processes.

I selected purposive sampling to elicit a range of responses from two critical groups of the Department's employees: principals and district directors. The disproportionate representation of low performing schools was deliberate as accountability processes and their success are of particular relevance to both schools and policy makers in the political educational spheres. The SEI of schools was a prominent demographic which I considered in selecting the sample, along with the nomenclature and geographic location of the school. I included male and female participants in the sample as both genders are represented in the whole population of Western Australian public school principals and district directors. The inclusion of district directors in the study provided additional perspectives, not included in the previous accountability study in Western Australian public schools by Strickland (2003).

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The successful analysis of interviews allows the data to speak for themselves (Patton, 2002), and culminates in the researcher presenting the perspectives of those interviewed in a coherent fashion. With this in mind, I examined transcriptions of the interviews, phrase by phrase, using an inductive analysis process (Vockell, 1983) to identify general themes. I ascribed the thematic labels using an *etic* approach (Patton, 2002), choosing labels that reflected the theoretical context of school accountability. However, some 'category' labels emerged from the responses themselves. In the tradition of narrative analysis, I added, changed and altered the categories as I examined the data repeatedly (Polkinghorne, 1995; Trahar, 2008). This is consistent with the nature of the questions I posed and the 'insider' perspective I bring to this research.

At this stage of data analysis, researchers are engaged in the problem of convergence; the nature of the categories, why some take priority over others and the determination that sufficient categories have been established (Guba, 1971; Silverman, 2006). To assist in resolving these problems, I recorded each thematic occurrence using a spreadsheet that identified how often each theme arose within and between participants, enabling patterns and categories to emerge with ease, eliminating, combining and creating themes or categories as I revised. By using a counting technique, advocated by Silverman (2006, p. 299) as a means of treating data comprehensively, I gained a sense of the variance and prevalence of concepts and themes. This “offers a means to survey the whole corpus of data ordinarily lost in intensive, qualitative research” (Silverman, 2006, p. 299).

Increasingly, the issue of divergence arose, causing me to address methodological issues that might assist me to uncover further information, make decisions about what information to include or exclude and decide when the analysis was sufficiently thorough to cease (Guba, 1971). The following issues emerged when participants described ways to improve schools:

- Recognising the need to improve
- Using data to identify what needs to improve and planning to improve
- Determining what is valid and reliable
- Committing to improvement
- Attending to the quality of teaching/competence of teachers/administrative staff
- Collaborating and using team approaches
- Having community wide approaches to issues
- Developing staff capacity

- Leading through instructional leadership
- Responding to feedback to parents from teachers
- Setting targets
- Considering program quality
- Changing student bodies
- Achieving staff cooperation with the purpose of school self-assessment
- Resourcing
- Intervening earlier when schools experience difficulty

Many other issues and concerns emerged as principals described their experiences of school self-assessment and school review processes and projected themselves into the role of advisor, making suggestions for peers, district directors and the system. This led to a revision of the initial themes and the frequency and prominence of each. I revisited each transcript using alternate conceptual sieves against the existing categories. I considered the frequency of mention for each issue, the breadth of response for each participant and the context each participant's comments were relevant to, whether summarising their experience or particular to their school context. Recurrent themes of participant concern emerged: suspicion about the purposes of accountability, powerlessness, concern about the validity of data, concern about the breadth and nature of achievement measured, methods of measuring student achievement, the authority of decision makers, stability over time, team approaches, ownership and frustration.

I moved to the ultimate activity of qualitative research: interpretation. The activity of interpretation moves beyond describing the data to interpreting, ascribing significance, drawing conclusions and making inferences (Patton, 2002). At this stage, I contemplated irregularities and contradictions and sought explanations that accounted for these in addition to the patterns I had noted in responses and themes. Contradictions emerged between participants and in some interviews the participants oscillated in their views, revealing tensions between their practice and how they wished others to perceive their practice.

I chose to interpret the data through narrative stories; this narrative form contextualises experience for the reader, giving a more powerful appreciation of the experience and eliciting emotions and a desire to discover the outcome for the protagonist. Narrative analytic procedures and representational forms are advantageous to this type of study where study participants report diverse experiences, events and occurrences. Disparate events can be synthesised to contribute context and meaning to a phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1995). The narrative story form is essentially western in its lexical signalling, following the structure of situation, problem, solution and evaluation. Thus the narrative form recapitulates experience for an audience (Cortazzi, 1993), giving the audience the opportunity to vicariously appreciate the experience of an other.

In all research, the issues of reliability and validity are considerations and in the case of interviews, a number of points are relevant. Interviews entail an interviewer posing questions to which participants answer. Thus, the interviewer sets the topic, focuses the participant and determines sequence or closes topics. Direct recounts are in any case a

reconstruction by the relator based on the abstraction of experience (Cortazzi, 1993).

Recalling and retelling is essentially inferential and constructionist or interpretive (Riessman, 1993). Recognised conditions for narrative to exist include a sequence of events in time, the likelihood that particular actions caused a further state and an element of human interest (Cortazzi, 1993). These conditions were evident in the replies to my interview questions and probes. In this sense I engaged in narrative interpretation: interpreting the stories or narrations of participants.

I was also inclined to use narratives to represent the data collected through interviews because this form gives an opportunity to represent experience and the significance attached to it by the participants (Conle, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1995). Each narrative represents themes that emerged from the experience of principals and directors who have carried out accountability processes in schools and relayed these to me. Narrative forms can shape our experiences whilst simultaneously portraying experiences (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2007) with greater powers of evocation than mere description. I fictionalised the narratives, with details such as gender omitted and descriptions of the location, school characteristics and references to people obscured. In most of the narratives, the responses of the participants are paraphrased to represent ideas and concepts expressed during the interview in a summarised and organised form. For example, the comments upon which '*Finally*' was based, included a lengthy description of how the principal implemented the school self-assessment processes. These comments I summarised to "We need to have self-assessment; it helps us focus on aspects of the school for that small period of time when the district director visits, that you might otherwise neglect... I have simplified the accountability process. I have

combined the best bits of about five department documents into one and changed the tools we use.” The narratives are interpretive of the substance of recounted experience and constructed subsequent to my analysis of the data collected.

### **Reliability and Trustworthiness**

Balance and fairness in qualitative inquiry are two ways of establishing trustworthiness and authenticity. Being conscientious in representing the perspectives and interests of participants in their multiplicities, and owning one’s biases as a researcher are others (Patton, 2002). A further trustworthiness consideration is the integrity of the researcher rather than “objectivity in the abstract” (Patton, 2002, p. 576). The issue of validity is relevant and the notion of validation (Riessman, 1993) which relies on persuasiveness and plausibility. I have attended to these aspects of qualitative study to improve the reliability and trustworthiness of this study. These considerations guided my choice of techniques for gathering and analysing data.

Consistent with my intention to conduct this study ethically and credibly, I acknowledge myself as a researcher with particular interests and perspectives on the matters I examine. In qualitative research, the impact of the researcher and the “truth status of the participant’s account” become important (Silverman, 2006, p. 290). I anticipated that other principals would have similar attitudes to my own due to my involvement in the same processes of school accountability. I have also been conscious of the need to represent and interpret the perspectives of others without reference to my own perspective, except as a stimulus to intensify the rigor of my analysis and interpretation. Larkin and colleagues (2006, p. 104) point out “the account is always constructed by

participant and researcher”. The researcher firstly tries to understand and describe another’s experience but must then interpret this in wider contexts, social, cultural and theoretical.

Based on my own and colleagues’ experiences, I gave some thought to my anticipation of interviewee responses. I considered the responses that did not conform to my expectations. I reflected in this manner throughout the process of devising interview questions, analysing themes that emerged and representing these themes through narratives. In making findings about the study, I contemplated the diversity of the themes and posed a number of possible explanations to myself. I also reviewed the themes that emerged with reference to the literature on the subject of accountability.

Of the four main credibility checks (Barker & Pistrang, 2005) to ensure rigor: consensus, auditing, participant validation and triangulation, this study incorporates the latter. I have not selected the technique of taking my findings back to participants in this study because the narratives and discussion of data are unlikely to correspond to the “self image of participants” (Silverman, 2006, p. 293). As discussed already in this chapter, the truth status of the interviewees’ recounts is interpretive and reconstructed through their own evaluative cognitive and emotional reflective schema. A further problem with triangulation involving participant-validation is that the material presented to participants would impose a new context on the data, undermining its comparability as a validation exercise (Silverman, 2006).



However, I sought a range of viewpoints about the same phenomenon in order to elicit multiple perspectives. The responses of all participants were analysed in this study and afforded the same treatment in categorisation, inclusion and deliberation. This is inclusive of responses that surprised me or conflicted with my preconceived expectations, causing me as the researcher to revise my own beliefs and reassess the interpretations I was making. For example, one principal participant was very positive about the school review process. I analysed the response to identify what it was about the process that made it positive and noticed that the district director implemented the school review process differently from other district directors.

By considering alternative interpretations of the data and supporting theoretical claims with evidence from participants' accounts, I have generated both persuasiveness and plausibility (Riessman, 1993). There were numerous statements made by a minority of participants, which diverged significantly from the statements of other participants and with my own beliefs. This prompted further reflection and examination of the transcripts and literature pertaining to the historical context of Western Australian accountability processes in public education. These responses further informed my interpretation of all responses and caused me to revise my initial categories for analysis. For example, I initially thought that cynicism and distrust were emergent themes but revised this to the mismatch of expectations arising from a bureaucratic-managerialist system approach to accountability conflicting with principals' expectations of professional accountability. I then interpreted principal cynicism and distrust as a symptom of disappointed expectations.

I used analytic induction and analytical interpretation of disconfirming cases (Patton, 2002) as two methods of achieving data validity. I used a spreadsheet to analyse responses indicated the frequency of responses by individuals and across participants. Using a new sheet for each major theme of the interview questions, I logged the number of responses in the categories that emerged. The response log noted the line reference to the interview transcript. I then grouped these response categories into broader themes. Quotations from the transcripts were included as comments in the cells where this clarified the interviewee's particular perspective. By using tabulations in this way and treating the data comprehensively, I improved the validity of the data. These are techniques identified by Silverman as appropriate for "validating studies based largely or entirely upon qualitative data" (2006, p. 295).

## School Accountability in Western Australia

Transcript Code	Looking for use of data	Looking for staff understanding and use	School's data use misses the point	Implies belief that use of data leads to improvement	Staff don't work together	Big Brother accountability perception by schools, external audit	Variable implementation of SR across schools	Validation of SSA by Review -appeals to school community	SR doesn't bring about School E or Im	DD need to understand the school context
<b>D1</b>	39	36	40, 41	42		47 60 61 97 102,103 171	48	62	70, 71	
<b>D2</b>			103, 104			207			151 151	
<b>D3</b>	15 16	17	217	15, 16	225		yes		55 111 123 148	
<b>P1</b>										
<b>P2</b>	62 90	189 299 305	79 297	70 189	150					324
<b>P3</b>		54 76	54 92	218		54 154 164	165 175	154	218	276 284
<b>P4</b>		99 116				72 255	156 162 163 172 188			216 240 249

*Figure 1.* Cells from the spreadsheet categorising district directors' and principals' experience of school review. Numbers in the cells indicate transcript line references.

Transcript Code	Cynicism	Powerlessness	Validity	What Gets Measured	How it gets measured
D1	x	X	yes	yes	yes
D2	yes	X	implied	yes	use of data
D3		Yes	yes	yes	yes
P1					
P2			assumed	assumed	assumed
P3	Line 276				
P4	yes	X		yes	yes
P5		Yes			
P6	yes		yes	yes	yes
P7	yes	yes/no		yes	
P8	yes	Line 411		yes	
P9			x	yes	yes
P10	yes			yes	
P11	Line 242		yes	yes	yes

Figure 2 Excerpt from spreadsheet of broad themes and issues referred to by interviewees.

The narratives I wrote illustrate the range of participants’ perspectives, capturing what initially appeared to be contradictory interpretations of similar phenomenon or negative cases (Given, 2006). I endeavoured to achieve coherence (Riessman, 1993) through presenting these different perspectives on recurrent themes. Making the process transparent and paying attention to the theoretical stance of the researcher makes research more reliable (Silverman, 2006). For the purposes of external validity, I was mindful that qualitative studies are not designed to generalise nor replicate in the same way as quantitative research. Consistent with the qualitative tradition, I was conscious the study might reveal some individual circumstances for which general findings might

not hold true (Given, 2006). However, I sought to achieve resonance with the reader in this study, a form of generalisation and goal of narrative writers.

### **Ethical Issues**

Subsequent to permission from Murdoch University, (see Appendix A: Notification of Human Research Ethics Approval), I contacted prospective participants individually and explained the nature and purpose of my study. I explained to each that I would need to record the interview and that they would have the opportunity to check the transcript for accuracy. I requested written consent of all participants to ensure they understood the nature of the study (See Appendix B: Letter of Consent and Information to Participants). I was conscious that responses might be genuine or contrived. In terms of a qualitative study, either would be informative leading me to a number of interpretations such as participant anxiety, participant avoidance of questions or uncertainty about the intent or meaning of the questions. The consent forms clearly requested consent to tape the interviews for the purpose of transcription.

My concern in this study was that no harm came to the participants. This is consistent with the principles of ethical conduct: integrity, respect for persons, beneficence and justice (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2008). The nature of potential harm would most likely take the form of exposing participants' views about their employer, line manager or processes in which they engage, to those to whom they did not wish to have their opinions revealed. To mitigate this harm, I specifically mentioned confidentiality, obfuscation of identifying demographic information and disassociation from my professional contacts, views and life in addition to the confidentiality

assurances inherent in writing for an academic audience. Some participants, notably directors, were cautious in their comments, obscuring the identity of people and schools to whom they referred. I chose not to probe for additional information when a participant appeared to exhibit anxiety about a question or had already responded to a question in previous dialogue. Participant anxiety and my responses to this were also concerned with ethical issues and ensuring that participants did not experience any harm because of participating in my study.

By omission of singular pronouns, I endeavoured in narrative text and discussions to maintain the anonymity of all participants and their schools or districts. I obscured references and inclusions of demographic details, and occasionally made minor alterations to the narrated experiences of participants that might reveal their identities. I used impersonal role labels such as ‘principal’ and referred to particular districts or schools non-specifically.

### **Chapter Review**

This chapter outlined the nature of my research and its qualitative design. The selection of participants was purposive and the design of questions and interview technique was consistent with this tradition. My analysis of data culminated in a narrative form to both interpret and represent the data. The narrative form provides the reader with insight into the constructed recollection of the accountability processes experienced by the participants of this study. I discuss the meaning of this information in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four: Data Representation

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### Overview

This chapter presents the narrative responses of the principals and district directors who participated in this research. Each narrative illuminates an aspect of school accountability as it occurs in schools, revealing some of its many nuances. District directors have perspectives about the school accountability processes, emanating from their role as school reviewers. They are responsible for managing the performance of principals in a district, attending to policy and operational matters that pertain to schools and managing district office staff. Their viewpoint adds complementary but sometimes alternate voices to those of principals. They express their understandings of their role and the role of principals and are able to articulate the issues they encounter while undertaking school reviews. District directors are pivotal people in the implementation of the Department's accountability policy and their voices broaden the scene and reveal other dimensions of schools' experience of school review.

School accountability, its purpose, practice and outcomes in Western Australian public schools is the framework for the grouping of the narratives. Within this scaffold, the chapter presents perspectives on both school review and school self-assessment, the two features of accountability policy with which this study is concerned. The principals and district directors who are the focus of each narrative operate in unique circumstances and diverse school contexts. However, in a comparison of the narratives a number of themes

emerge. The chapter concludes with a summary of these themes that the narratives illustrate.

### **The Purpose of Accountability**

The first four narratives render the participants' perceptions of the purpose of accountability. Four principals recount their experiences relating to school self-assessment and school review, revealing their beliefs and perceptions and the challenges particular to their context. The principal in *Out of Control* has worked in schools catering for Indigenous students while the principal in *Big Brother* works in a school for children in an affluent metropolitan area. Like the principal in *Out of Control*, the first narrative, *No Accounting for Parents*, is located in a school context where students are not successful in becoming literate and the school engages in accountability processes with transitory teaching staff. There are voices of experienced principals in *Missing the Point* and *Big Brother*, both of whom reveal tensions between the Department's accountability processes and their beliefs about its purpose.

The narrative *Out of Control* conveys the principal's acceptance of accountability but preoccupation with school improvement, to which end the principal believes accountability is not serving a useful purpose. The principal in *No Accounting for Parents*, acknowledges that accountability processes can be useful for bringing about improvement in learning through addressing particular learning highlighted by accountability processes. This latter principal sees the purpose of accountability as measuring academic learning and unrelated to meeting the immediate and basic needs of students, which the school prioritises over academic matters. In the narrative *Missing the*



*Point*, the principal espouses the view that the purpose of accountability is ‘proving improvement’. Compliance auditing is the perceived purpose of accountability conveyed in the fourth narrative.

### **Out of Control**

I have been in Indigenous schools as an administrator for nine years now. They have all been decile 10 (low socio-economic status) schools in communities where employment for Indigenous adults is the exception. The two schools before this had fewer than 100 students. In terms of their literacy and numeracy results, you could not say any of them are effective.

We know why our students do not achieve. We analyse our results from WALNA and we use other diagnostic tools, which give us quite specific information about what the students can do. I work with teachers on planning how we can improve teaching and we do make small improvements as a result. When I say **we** I am being optimistic. I work hard to get teachers skilled to use assessment tools, to analyse the information and address the students’ needs.

I have a focus on staff development because I believe this will lead to improvement over time. However, this year started with only one teacher who was here last year so I must address the same issues again. It annoys me that I have no role in the selection of teachers. We do not often get experienced teachers, or teachers who thrive despite the isolation and social dysfunction of the community. Our school review report this year acknowledges the school context but does not offer any solutions.

Basic school buildings are in need of urgent maintenance. There are no secondary or specialist subject rooms or equipment and staffing issues are an ongoing challenge. We have had to abandon the Year 11 and 12 programs because we are not able to support them with suitable teachers and older students were having a negative impact on the younger secondary students, encouraging truanting and disrespectful behaviour. That has happened since the school review but I expect the district director knows it is impossible to cater for these students.

I struggle to see how the school’s efforts alone will improve student results. Our attendance data shows many students attending less than 80 percent of the time, so we deploy many resources to this issue. Staff, time and money directed to student truancy takes resources away from teaching. We all know what the issues are and we know what the optimal conditions are for students to achieve. I am frustrated that I cannot make them happen.

The principal implements a school self-assessment process with the staff, using tools such as WALNA and others that school administrators have identified as being relevant to gather evidence about the school's performance. There is no difficulty in identifying the aggregated level of either student achievement or the priorities for the school. However, the capacity of teachers influences the focus of school self-assessment. High staff turnover compounds any skill development needs of teachers and destabilises the improvement of the school. The principal guides the staff to use the student achievement information to deliver programs that are responsive to the needs of the students. The principal in *No Accounting for Parents* encounters a similar school context and notes the focus of parents in the school community.

### **No Accounting for Parents**

I have been principal for four years but I will be moving on next year. I was a deputy at a couple of other district high schools and a district level Curriculum Improvement Officer over the past twenty years. Teachers at this school begin to use effective teaching strategies and become competent practitioners as they complete their three-year contract. They leave and new graduates are appointed so most teachers are inexperienced and still developing teaching and assessment skills.

I know school self-assessment is important. I give teachers a day or two each year to do their part of it. Before the district director visits, the deputy principals and I talk about our West Australian Literacy and Numeracy (WALNA) data. Even though our results are low, we use them to see if we have made any improvement. A couple of years ago we noticed that two aspects of maths were particularly low. The numeracy data from WALNA testing showed students' performance was distinctly lower in those aspects so we concentrated on them and purchased measuring and geometrical equipment. Some parents commented that they liked to know their children were enjoying themselves at school and they approved of the purchases.

Parents and the school community should be included in the school, even though it would be easier to do some of the school accountability paperwork without their input. Most of the parents and a number of the teachers are unsophisticated in the way they understand school performance. I prepare visual aids and graphs to help parents on the Council, none of whom has post secondary education, understand student achievement. Although the School Council looks at the school's WALNA performance as a whole, parents are mostly concerned about whether their children are happy, feel safe and are comfortable with what is happening at school. They say they do not need graphs about this because their children come home and tell them what is going on.

Most of the things we deal with here are to do with student health and well-being. I deal with student conflict and disruptive students every day and counsel teachers and students about behaviour. We encourage students to change into a school shirt when they arrive and offer a simple breakfast before school. The deputy principals and I spend more time on behaviour, attendance and wellbeing than we do on academic standards. Firstly, we have to get students to school then we work to address their basic needs and finally we might attend to their learning.

Parents expect that we will prevent teasing at school. Parents sometimes come to school and abuse teachers for reprimanding their children. No parents have complained about their children's standards of learning. We know that poor behaviour is a barrier to learning but managing it effectively takes energy. I have little time left to focus on curriculum matters. I am satisfied if we make progress in improving attendance, student well being and behaviour.

This principal's reflections on school self-assessment indicate awareness of school self-assessment processes but an emphasis on addressing the daily issues that occur in the school. The principal is aware that the community context is one of disadvantage and concern with daily events. The parents of the students do not share the principal's concern about their children's educational attainment and consequently parents do not apply pressure to teachers about student learning. The context of *Missing the Point* is dissimilar as the workforce is stable and students are achieving at or above average results.

### **Missing the Point**

My teachers at this primary school are experienced. I have been a principal longer than any of them has been teaching and some have taught here for 20 years. We are an average school with a middle class socio-economic demographic intake. We have few Aboriginal students and non-English speaking migrant students. Most of our students behave well and make progress in their learning from year to year. Some of our students are gifted and achieve very well academically, in the arts or physical pursuits. Being a principal is getting more difficult with each year because of the incessant emphasis on proving that the school is improving.

The Department puts too much emphasis, unfortunately, on the WALNA results and evidence. I disagree with standardized tests because whenever you use standardized tests you test different cohorts. You would have to test at the beginning and end of every year in every subject to see if students are improving. How can it be a standardized test if it is run by the classroom teacher and administered in the classroom? I do not believe that is valid and useful information. The Department judges a school's effectiveness on these results.

The present school self-assessment system places too much emphasis on the academic side of education. Physical, social and emotional skills are also integral aspects of education. Student outcomes should not be the measure of school effectiveness. The Department should not just look at the WALNA and MSE results because you might think a school is not improving. The fact that we will not have WALNA testing next year proves my point about its worth. Our teachers have been trained in 'Making Consistent Judgements' and I believe in the professional judgments of school leaders and teachers.

I do not spend a lot of time looking at the WALNA statistics at my school but I know about the students. My teachers know who is going to be successful and who is struggling to learn the basics. I do not believe the WALNA information will help our students achieve. Number crunching has nothing to do with schools. Quality teachers are what makes a school improve.

The principal, over many years of experience has witnessed change in accountability processes, through the altered focus, emphasis and level of scrutiny to which schools are subject. This school principal expresses a resistance to the increasing prominence of measuring academic aspects of school performance that is now evident. The principal expresses this as resentment of an emphasis on literacy and numeracy or academic learning and a diminishing recognition, by the Department, of other aspects of student learning. The following principal affirms the experience of change in accountability and suggests that compliance is a pre-eminent purpose of accountability processes.

### **Big Brother**

In my 15 years as a Level 5 primary school principal, I have seen many changes. I have had opportunities to work in Central Office in recent years and I am an active member of my professional association. My current school is in an area that has the most advantaged students in the state. Our student body has parents with high-paying employment or business interests and high levels of material and educational success. Our students achieve above average results in WALNA and many are successful in a range of pursuits such as instrumental music, dance and artistic hobbies. Our students are willing and committed to working towards academic success. Their parents have high expectations for their children and expect that we will achieve high results.

The main purpose of school accountability now is compliance. Whenever I talk to a district director, it is all about compliance. The bottom line for a politician and the senior bureaucrats to whom district directors report, is compliance. We are accountable to our district director to ensure that we have in place processes and procedures that enable them to tick boxes. Schools will succumb to the temptation to teach to the test. Education seems to have more accountability than any other department and we take the blame for issues we did not create such as non-attendance, poor student behaviour and low resilience.

Principals are trying hard and school review needs to be a tool to support us rather than a big stick. We get rigorous scrutiny from the district director who wants to see evidence that we are improving. Scrutiny puts a lot of pressure on principals and staff. We just get over one school review and must begin planning for the next one. You have to be able to justify what has been going on and you have to have a plan for improvement if things have not worked. I would prefer school review to be about supporting schools. Now each principal is responsible for his or her school's improvement and the district director is reporting on how successful the principal is at improvement.

My school is effective; most of our students do well. However, for some schools, school accountability is about saying, 'you are a failure'. Those schools are being asked to bash themselves across the head. Their demographic is a predictor of low student achievement and they receive few compensatory resources to address their disadvantage. I do not have a problem with striving to improve school performance. I do not see how this emphasis on compliance helps us achieve that.

This principal, who speaks with confidence on issues such as school accountability, drawing on years of experience and dealings with other school leaders and Department public servants, has identified a bureaucratic emphasis in the school accountability policy. The principal is conscious of the political origins of accountability and is sceptical about the executive directors whose role it is to respond to political directives. The principal does not see the accountability process as fair and expresses this as schools needing to self identify their own failure.

Accountability derived from political impetus and accountability to an auditing organisation are two themes that emerge in these narratives. Principals allude to the purpose of school self-assessment but the school review facet of accountability in these narratives overshadows this. Similarly, principals describe accountability in connection with inspection and compliance. Accountability for school improvement receives less attention and credence although additional support is one hoped-for function of district director school visits.

### **The Practice of Accountability**

The four narratives to follow revolve around the practice of accountability in schools. Three principals and a district director recount their experience of school review, with references to school self-assessment. *Coaching the Novices* is a district director's description of what occurs when a district director visits a school. The subsequent narratives are principals with their experiences of district directors' visits connected to school review. In all three, the district director visits the school on a periodic basis.



### **Coaching the Novices**

I have conducted school reviews predominantly in schools with fewer than 100 students where the principals are new to the role. Principals see school review as giving an account to the district director and they tend to use school review to prove their competence or the success of the school. Teachers see school review as a matter for the principal and the district director rather than a shared responsibility including other staff members. School review is still seen by many people in school communities as an external audit instead of a validation of their own judgments of their progress.

We can see the extent to which certain schools promote improvement compared to other schools. The Department does look at residual curves from student assessment so we have a view of typical and normatively distributed growth. Sometimes principals collect data for the sake of collecting data. However, I am looking for teaching staff and the principal knowing what valid and reliable data are. I want to see that they analyse them, plan for improvement and then monitor progress to enhance student performance.

I know in some schools the information and discussion on school review day is unconnected to what has occurred since the last district director visit. This is because as teachers in schools, many of today's principals did not have direct contact with school accountability processes. Consequently, my role as a district director is mostly talking to principals about school self-assessment and suggesting ways to approach school improvement. I think of it as 'marking my own work'.

I am not convinced that school review has a strong effect in terms of school effectiveness and school improvement. Nevertheless, if conducted appropriately, school self-assessment makes a significant difference to student learning.

This district director is disappointed that schools are not engaging in productive school self-assessment. Instead, the district director role has become that of coach, assisting and building the capacity of principals to work purposefully with their staff. This district director believes that school review involves teaching staff; this district director expects teachers to be engaging in improvement related activities as part of their daily work. The district director believes coaching is necessary when principals are new to their roles and have not been included in school accountability processes as teachers.

In the following narrative, the principal wants support that focuses on the school's needs and resists short-term visits by district personnel on the basis that their lack of contextual awareness diminishes the help they can offer. The principal views support from the District Office and school review as related to one another. The principal expects that the school will receive assistance due to its challenging circumstances but realises that school review and District Office involvement might be different in other schools. In this particular school, the issue of equity is paramount and the scenario described indicates that the district directors have made decisions recognising and mitigating against the extremely unequal challenges faced by this school.

### **Take Your Time**

This is a small, isolated school with about 140 students. Sometimes the electrical generators do not operate at night and maintenance of buildings and utilities is infrequent. The climate is very hot for six months of the year. Other government agencies represented in this community include police, child protection and health. There is also a religious organisation. People fly when they need to come here or leave. I won the principal's position through merit selection after a year as deputy principal here. In my time, there have been three district directors, two since I became principal.

I do not think I will ever feel totally at ease with a school review visit. I look at them as an opportunity to have fresh eyes look at how we do things. You need someone else to give you an objective perspective. It is easy to become absorbed in the drama of each day and I like to hear other points of view. I see it as an opportunity to learn and improve my own practice and to reflect on what is happening in the school. Fundamentally, we are accountable and so we should be.

Both district directors, since I became principal, took the time to familiarise themselves with the school and find out about our context, which I appreciated. That is important for a school like this with many challenges. Our focus is on providing a safe and caring environment for the students. I do not think they can learn when they have had no sleep or they are sick, hungry or traumatised. I have found that we get a reasonable level of support from the District Office now. However, school review is the main reason we have contact with the district director.

In the second year that I was here, I did not want people coming out for just one day any more because it is not cost effective. People need to understand the context when they give advice or support. Fortunately, people took that on and now they stay over night. I might think differently when I change schools and move to another district but school review has been a positive experience for me.

The principal is willing to accept advice and anticipates that school review will be a learning experience. The principal expects the process will be personally beneficial, assist the staff to reflect further on what they have achieved, and help them to work more effectively. The principal has taken on the role with some administrative experience although the context is paramount in the principal's perceptions. The frequent changes in district director for this district give the principal opportunities to see different people in the role.

Novice principals are not the only educators who express uncertainty about school review. Nor are they the only principals to seek support from the district director through the school review process. The experienced principal in *Just Tell Me* makes comparisons between districts, directors and the review process itself.

### **Just Tell Me**

I was a deputy principal for 13 years before I became a principal. That was nine years ago and I commenced in this school at the beginning of the year. It is a Level 5 school, like my last school, but in a different district so there is a different district director.

I have noticed several differences in the way district directors conduct school review. In my last school, the district director discouraged us from looking at '*First Cut*'. My new district director is organizing workshops on it so it is quite confusing. I feel annoyed that district directors do not tell me how they want information presented before they arrive for a school review visit. That happened at my last school. I spent the whole day feeling I was not doing it right. I was angry because my understanding was that I could organise it as I saw fit as long as I achieved the desired outcome. I was pleased the district director and I knew each other and this helped because I received positive feedback at the end of the day after all.

The way my new district director does school review varies from previous district directors. Previous district directors and directors in other districts visit the school and talk with the principals and deputy principals. They listen and look at what the school staff has prepared and sometimes talk to teachers. This district director organises subordinates into small teams of three principals. We spend a day together in each other's schools with the district director, visiting classrooms and seeing what we each claim to have happening in action. It is excellent professional development, collegiate and uplifting. It enhances my understanding of an effective school and gives me some more strategies and ideas that I am using with my staff. I like the idea that colleagues can give feedback to each other in a constructive non-threatening way. Another strategy from the review process that I have adopted is to facilitate teachers visiting each other's classes.

I like to seek direction about school review from the district directors because it keeps them on side. It is wise to play to their idiosyncrasies. I hope more notice is taken of this new way we do review with our district director. I would like to see this model expanded.

This is an experienced principal with a number of school review experiences to reflect on. The principal approaches school review in an organised way, understanding and expecting that preparation is required. The recount of a previous school review indicates the principal focuses on the intent of the process until a discrepancy with the district director arises. This discrepancy over the presentation of information serves to divert attention from the core business of school review. Preparation, foci on outcomes, allocation of time and resources for school review are all important to this principal.

The principal in *Finally* has experienced many school reviews and is keen to share the most recent experience with others. The principal is free from the tyranny of distance, unlike the principal in *Take Your Time*. This principal looks for opportunities to improve practice and advocates meaningfulness in the work required of others.

**Finally**

I have been at this school for over a decade now. I consider this a successful school. We have gender balance in the teaching profile and half of them are senior teachers. Most teachers have been here for many years. I was the sixth principal in five years when I arrived so it took some time to build up trust with the teachers, students and parents.

We need to have self-assessment; it helps us focus on aspects of the school for that small period of time when the district director visits, that you might otherwise neglect. It is difficult to convince teachers that preparations for accountability review are important. Therefore, we have changed our accountability format this year. For the first time in my career, teachers are now seeing that there is value in their input, rather than just doing it for the sake of doing it. For the first time in my career, I have teachers who use the school development plan too.

I have simplified the accountability process. I have combined the best bits of about five Department documents into one and changed the tools we use. The main thing is I have engaged the staff in the process. We have created online surveys making it easy for teachers to follow and participate in. Once they input that data we take it and make changes in the school because of what they have put in. The district director is impressed with this and asked me to model it with a few other schools.

The principal is responsible for pointing the school in the right direction and getting staff to work towards a shared vision. Sometimes the role of principal is underestimated.

This principal is keen for teachers to be engaged in meaningful work and is excited that they see value and demonstrate some commitment in preparing for school review. This excitement demonstrates understanding of the integral role ownership has to play in motivating teachers. It also illustrates the importance teachers place on tasks with direct connection to teaching and learning. The principal ascribes teacher motivation to a simplified information collection strategy and to the use of the information, which teachers provided. Again, this illustrates that the staff understand there are desirable outcomes from participating and they have sufficient clarity to reach this understanding. The use of online surveys is a successful feature of the modified process because it gives teachers an equal voice and opportunity to participate.

These narratives demonstrate a variety of practices associated with school accountability. These include school staff showing directors the data they have collected, and attempting to prove the school is successful on school review day but possibly not sustaining an improvement approach as part of regular school operations. Some schools have internal accountability mechanisms that involve teachers identifying and working towards improvement in student achievement. Some principals lead school self-assessment in their schools and can demonstrate this to a district director. The way a school review day is conducted features in one narrative, which describes how district directors vary in their expectations and practice.



### **The Outcomes of Accountability**

Two principals and a district director comment on school review and school improvement through school self-assessment in the final trio of narratives. The first, *Getting Results*, describes a school community that perceives a direct link between the school's performance and future possibilities for the students. The focus for this school is on student achievement, unimpeded by the demands of social issues to the extent of schools such as that in *Out of Control*. The application of school self-assessment in an Education Support context follows in *Accounting for Difference* and the final narrative *Role Limitations* presents a district director's perspective of the outcomes of accountability through school review and school self-assessment.

The outcomes of accountability described in the following narratives include a culture of improvement based on evidence about student learning in a school implementing school self-assessment. However, one principal found a school review contributed additional workload for staff and no outcomes for students. The district director in *Role Limitations* identifies ways to make the school review aspect of accountability more effectual for school improvement and uses the district director role to promote school self-assessment. A range of outcomes in the following narratives is evident with discussion of both school review and school self-assessment facets of school accountability.

### **Getting Results**

I have been principal at this Senior High School for five years now and I can see some of my goals coming to fruition. When I initially required teachers to confront and look at the evidence about our students' achievement, they were reluctant to acknowledge that student achievement was unsatisfactory.

Our Year 12 results are a visible, public representation of school performance. We had to get teachers in every subject area involved in examining the performance of all year groups and then they were able to implement and monitor strategies and programs to improve our results. Teachers compare our students against state norms using '*First Cut*' and we look at the progress our students have made, not just their level of achievement.

I know most of our teachers make changes to their teaching because of what the data tells them and the way we structured subject area teams. The heads of learning areas are responsible for a lot of the coordination of analysing data, designing and implementing programs and monitoring them. Data analysis encourages a culture of self-reflection and teachers respond to the evidence and information we have. The School Accountability Framework is more useful for this now that the focus is about improvement. A few years ago, Superintendents inspected schools to determine their level of compliance so teachers did not see any connection to improving student performance. It is not reasonable to expect people to commit to things they do not believe in.

We plan and set targets and structure organizational matters to ensure that teachers can do these things and believe in what they are doing. I am pleased to see the 20-25 percent improvement in TEE scores over the last three years. I am confident we are going to continue to improve.

The principal has a sense of accountability to the community, which judges the school's performance on the students' TEE results. This principal responds strategically with a planned process to bring about school improvement and describes outcomes arising from his actions. While the link between school improvement and a school self-assessment process is evident, a link to school review was absent in the principal's recount.

Similarly, the principal in the next narrative focuses on improvement for students and describes the practice of planning for improvement based on student achievement. The principal describes the school review process from the perspective of a novice principal in a school catering to a minority group of students.

### **Accounting for Difference**

I am a new principal. This is my first year and I am enjoying the challenge of leading a team of teachers and education assistants in an Education Support School. I teach a third of the time. In a school of this size for special needs students, it is all hands on deck. Students at this school have multiple disabilities and they are moderate to severe. Students with mild disabilities are not eligible to enrol.

Students have to be assessed in a range of contexts using a range of media before one can say that a student has mastered something. Goals or targets for individual students are an expectation in this school. Each student has an individual education plan. We assess students regularly, at least twice a term and then analyse the assessments. We monitor each student's progress daily and make changes to respond to the student's needs. If a student is not grasping a particular concept or skill we go back and work on it. When students have achieved the planned outcomes, we revise their plan accordingly. We are constantly improving our teaching techniques and searching for literature on successful Education Support interventions. We do not usually have any students sitting WALNA so our performance does not really fit with what district directors are looking for.

We have already had our first school review visit for the year. The district director's report said we were effective. I do not see how it could say anything else. The district director seemed interested to hear about how we use a case management approach to planning, teaching and monitoring every student's progress. I had to explain what we do here because the district director was not aware of how an Education Support School operates. I spent hours and hours getting all our information into files and labelling it, although the other teachers did much of that with me.

With all the individual education plans and review documentation twice a year for every student, there is a lot of information to sort through before we decide what to present for the district director. I will get the *Review Framework* out and start getting organized for the next visit. At least next time the district director will know what to expect.

The district director's perspective in the final narrative echoes this principal's comment about district directors being unaware of Education Support schools' operations. Both principal and district director voices in this final set of narratives question the utility of school review in bringing about school improvement where schools are already engaged in improvement processes. The district director in *Role Limitations* identifies community reassurance as an outcome of school review for small communities. The district director acknowledges a need for different approaches to different school needs. A number of different outcomes of accountability are evident, each attributable to a combination of the facet of accountability implemented, the nature of the school and the actions of individuals involved.

### **Role Limitations**

Much of my work as a district director in several districts over the past five years has been getting schools to understand that school review is about the outcomes of the self-assessment they have engaged in. Where self-assessment was working well my role was minor. In Education Support schools, particularly, I learnt a lot but did not improve the school's self-assessment process.

In effective schools, there is a strong focus on the activity of teachers in classrooms. I expect that schools themselves have determined their expectations of student performance and of teachers because there is such a significant connection between the two. They would have targets and ways to measure student and teacher performance so they could determine whether improvement has occurred. The nature of the school's expectations would be relevant to the school. They could be about student behaviour, for example.

The school review process has an important part to play when I can align resources to a school in difficulty through the District Office or through Central Office. I cannot always enlist the support of the system. For example, staffing interventions would sometimes improve a school's performance. We do have a significant number of schools that are requiring differential support but we have one-size-fits-all policies.

I disagree with other district directors; they tend to go in and almost do the assessment themselves rather than appraise the school's self-assessment. Even though schools, through principals, are accountable to district directors, I authenticate the school's findings. I do not investigate to determine findings. However, school communities, particularly small communities, like to have someone as an external auditor. It gives them assurance that their school is doing the right thing by their children.

This district director is not new to the role, having acquired breadth of experience by moving between districts. The district director reflects on the purpose and impact of the district director role and makes judgments about the degree of success that school accountability processes are having. This district director is certain about the intentions of the role and is alert to the perceptions of schools and the need to develop the capacity of schools to engage in school self-assessment. Both principals in the final narratives support the process of school self-assessment to bring about school improvement, although not using the term to describe their practice. They describe focussing on student achievement and planning interventions in response to evidence.

### **Contrast and Corroboration: A Cross Case Analysis**

A number of narratives indicate principals and district directors perceive principals to be the link between the intentions of accountability policy and its outcomes. In this regard, they are conduits in an environment of change. The Department disseminates a system of accountability through its hierarchy from the Director General to teachers in schools. The principal in *Finally* articulates the expectation of the Department that principals will elicit teacher commitment to accountability policy through persuasive and collaborative dialogue. The principal comments on the necessity of school self-assessment and the difficulty of convincing teachers that preparation for school review is important. Furthermore, a principal articulates a view that the Department makes each principal responsible for his or her school's improvement in *Big Brother*.

The principal in *Getting Results* understands that other leaders in the administration team and teachers need to believe in and own the process of change. Recognising this

takes time, the principal orchestrates school-wide action designed to bring about long term, sustainable change. The principal describes a transition to a school culture of self-reflection and acknowledges that teachers need to believe in the purpose of their work. Teachers are integral to the improvement in student performance in this narrative, which indicates that the principal expects teachers to modify their individual goals to support school goals. The change strategy has included attention to resourcing, decision-making by teachers and the opportunity for teachers to receive feedback about their performance.

The principal in *Finally* seeks information beyond the data available through state-wide testing. This principal has a clear sense that information about student or school performance is integral to planning for improvement. In this case, the principal takes ownership of issues such as a lack of meaningful involvement of staff in assessing and planning school performance. The principal understands that commitment from teachers is required for anything to change and recognises that the principal's role is to bring about policy implementation.

The principal role emerges from the narratives as pivotal to bringing about improvement and coordinating the efforts of school staff members. Where the principal is convinced of the efficacy of accountability policy, there is probability of implementation. The principal in *Missing the Point* is unlikely to lead the staff to implement accountability mechanisms, foci or changes because the principal is not convinced they benefit students. Consequently, this school is likely to ignore aspects of the accountability policy. This lack of confidence in the tools suggests teachers in the school might not



administer standardised tests with integrity, contributing to potentially less than robust results.

A number of principals reveal their beliefs about personal efficacy, the agency of the principal role and the connection to school improvement. The principal in *Take Your Time* has been assertive and has a strong sense of personal agency. This has occurred because the principal made the school's support needs known to the district director and District Office teams. The District Office acceded to the principal's requests.

Consequently, the principal feels supported by the district but recognises that this support reflects the particular circumstances of the school. This principal believes that accountability is a positive and necessary part of the role and looks for the benefits it can bring to the school. The principal engages with staff in reflective practice and wants to direct effort in ways that will benefit the students.

The principal in *Out of Control* reports some improvements to student achievement due to the examination and guided use of student performance data but acknowledges that they are small. The school's self-assessment process confirms the principal's expectations of student achievement in the school. Despite implementing these processes in the school, this principal reports that the students' achievement in literacy and numeracy is not adequate. The principal expresses the view that the school is unlikely to improve to the point where the achievement of students will become satisfactory unless additional support and resources are forthcoming. The principal is frustrated but not surprised, at being unable to bring about significant change.

The principal in *Out of Control* recognises there are issues beyond the school's control that influence the degrees to which students at the school succeed. The principal's concern about the resources allocated to the school relates to the issue of equity: some schools attract students identified as relatively disadvantaged. The school's response to these issues is to implement educational triage as a way of dealing with the resource issues confronting the school. The school abandons the Year 11 and 12 students in favour of the Year 8, 9 and 10 students. School self-assessment has highlighted the school's performance but this principal believes the school staff and community have insufficient capacity to improve.

The district director in *Coaching the Novices* indicates that the role of the principal is integral to school improvement and the effectiveness of accountability processes. The district director approaches the director role from the perspective of building capacity of principals to work effectively with their staff, as does the district director in *Role Limitations*. The former district director's comment about why school accountability processes are not part of the regular work of teachers reflects the belief that principals are responsible for making this happen. The district director of *Role Limitations* reflects on the district director capacity to bring about changes to resourcing and sometimes staffing, using the power of the position to improve schools' circumstances.

District directors monitor and report on policy implementation but may assist principals who are facing challenges like those in *Out of Control*. Schools like the ones described by *Getting Results* and *Accounting for Differences* appear to gain little from the district director visiting to review their school. The principal's sense of agency and confidence

in *Getting Results* conveys a belief about the role and potential effectiveness a school principal can have on school improvement. Not only does this principal have goals, there is also evidence of their realisation. Schools like the ones which feature in *Take Your Time*, potentially accrue benefit from the review process. The benefits may not directly link to student outcomes but encompass improving or providing the conditions necessary for students to achieve.

School review is still associated with a level of anxiety. The principal in *Take Your Time* understands it as a process with the possibility of consequences, whether symbolic or tangible. The *Finally* narrative refers to simplifying processes and recreating accountability documents in an attempt to make the processes relevant to teachers. There is an expression of relief from the principal in *Accounting for Difference* that the annual school review has taken place. The principal tempers the comment with a remark about commencing preparations for the next review visit. When it appears the preparation for a school review day was ‘wrong’, the experienced principal in *Just Tell Me* talks of anger and distress. In *Missing the Point*, the principal says the role is increasingly difficult due to the incessant emphasis on proving that the school is improving.

Not every principal experiences school review with anxiety. The principal’s attitude in *Out of Control* suggests an undercurrent of tolerance by the Department for the level of student achievement due to the nature of the challenges that school faces. There is an underlying tacit agreement between the school in *Out of Control* and the District Office that the school struggles and the principal can seek support. There is also acknowledgement that support is costly and needs to be efficient. This further suggests

that the Department tolerates low achievement in some circumstances. The schools in *No Accounting for Parents* and *Take Your Time* share the challenges of poor student achievement. The principal in *Big Brother* alludes to these types of schools as failing. These ‘failing school’ principals do not express the anxiety about school review visits of the metropolitan principals in schools with adequate or high levels of achievement.

The principal of *Big Brother* attributes intense scrutiny, such as that associated with school review, to creating considerable pressure on principals and teachers. This principal suggests it is likely that this level of invigilation might create circumstances under which school staffs may subvert the intent of student achievement tests. This principal asserts the emphasis on academic performance will lead to reductionism - a narrowing of the curriculum so that the students receive instruction focussed on the skills required to achieve adequately on standardised testing.

One principal is distrustful and suspicious about the alignment of policy and practice in the Department. The principal’s contention in *Big Brother* that school accountability intends to achieve compliance is in direct contradiction to the disseminated policy statements about School Accountability processes. The perspective of this principal finds limited resonance with the district directors. One district director refers to the ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy approach of the Department. However, the district director in *Role Limitations* conceives his role as supporting schools in developing school self-assessment processes and aligning resources to school.

Without any reference to assistance from the district director, the principal in *Accounting for Difference* describes rigorous practice that occurs in the school. The school practice described by this principal concurs with the district director's view expressed in *Role Limitations* that effective schools have teachers focusing on and using student achievement information to improve teaching and learning. This Education Support School implements the specialised planning that is required for special needs students and keeps meticulous records of student progress. The principal has detailed knowledge of what the students can do because teachers monitor student achievement closely. Furthermore, if students have not achieved their learning goals, teachers implement adjustments to improve the program.

The practices of other school principals support the views of the principal in *Big Brother* about accountability and compliance. There is a strong focus on assessing learning for the purpose of informing future teaching, or 'programs' which will ensure student learning in *Accounting for Difference*. The reflective cycle of teach-assess-plan-teach is integral to the operation of this school but there is a perceived mismatch with the accountability policy. This principal has generalised the 'otherness' of the students to the school and its operations and the district director's visit has confirmed a view that school review does not quite fit the school context. The principal continues with a belief that school review is about complying with policy but sees no imperative to make any changes to the school's operations as the result of a school review.

The Education Support principal understands school review to be about results and understands that state-wide mandatory testing determines the degree to which a school is

'measuring up'. The principal questions the relevance of school review to the particular school context and describes diverting considerable resources to preparing for the district director's visit. The principal's understanding of school review is confirmed when the district director visits and is not familiar with the way special needs schools operate. The principal interprets the school's finding from the outcome of this visit as indicative of the district director's knowledge of special needs education. The visit does not gratify the principal nor does it lead to any changes for the students or learning for the school staff. The principal believes it led to learning for the district director but resents the disruption to the school required for this to occur.

The experience of the district director in *Coaching the Novices*, who works mainly with small schools and inexperienced principals, suggests schools respond and implement the Department's policy on accountability in a variable manner. This begs the question whether it is the nature of the policy that is generating resistance or the nature and capacity of schools to implement the policy. This district director is not impressed by schools that amass information for consideration when a director visits but do not use it to plan improvement for students. The district director understands that some schools produce a lot of information for visits but do not engage with information about student performance in their school or classroom planning. The narrative *Accounting for Difference* indicates some schools do both and endure significant pressure as a result.

The self-assessment process the school in *No Accounting for Parents* has adopted focuses attention on some aspects of learning and teaching in the school and has guided the allocation of some resources to an area of identified need. There is no indication,

however, of staff decision making or collaborative investigation of a school response to low performance by students. Self-assessment appears to be a point-in-time exercise rather than an ongoing aspect of teaching throughout the year. This suggests that it may link to specific preparation for a school review visit, in the manner referred to by the district director in *Coaching the Novices*. In fact, there seem to be simultaneous accountability activities occurring in isolation to each other.

The experiences of some veteran principals, in *Just Tell Me* and *Missing the Point*, suggest that variations in district director expectations have contributed to increased workload for principals in preparation for school reviews. This is an issue alluded to by principals in large schools that perform satisfactorily. Principals also comment on the number of district directors or changes in school review they have encountered from year to year, (*Just Tell Me* and *Take Your Time*) or indicate that they themselves are new to the principal role, school or both. The views of the district directors contrast with the perceptions of some principals on the matter of additional pressure through information preparation. The district director in *Coaching the Novices* refers to school staffs collecting data for the sake of it. The combination of these factors indicates that variation in conduct of the school review process occurs between district directors and changes over time.

Inconsistencies in the practice of school accountability undermine principals' confidence in the authority of the school review and district directors' competence. The discrepancy between district directors' directions about the use of 'First Cut' bemuses the principal in *Just Tell Me*, as it symbolises what the principal considers inappropriate inconsistency

amongst district directors. The extent of the discrepancy also surprises the principal. The anxiety of changing expectation, illustrated in *Just Tell Me*, contributes additional pressure to principals and intensified scrutiny of their work. The episodes recounted insinuate unfair treatment by a system that allows this to happen and by the actions of a particular district director. These issues can accumulate into distrust and dismissal of the accountability policy or process by principals, ultimately undermining the policy's implementation.

The principal in *Missing the Point* believes the Department scrutinises data to make judgments about a school's effectiveness and is worried that the mandated tests make it look as if schools are not improving. This principal distrusts mandatory state-wide tests, and the uses to which the Department puts the results. This distrust encompasses a lack of confidence in standardized tests. The principal questions their reliability and doubts the suitability of classroom teachers administering them. The principal is disdainful of the mandatory nature and purpose of testing with tools such as WALNA. By questioning the focus and the key tools used to measure school effectiveness and success, this principal in *Missing the Point* challenges the accountability policy.

This principal is not alone in criticising the Department's requirements. In *Big Brother*, the principal talks about school accountability and particularly the implementation of school review. The comments in the narrative reflect the central theme of knowing how the school is performing but move on to ascribe reasons unrelated to students achieving. Some comments reflect the principal's experience in *Out of Control* and the issues of causality, the factors teachers have control over which lead to student achievement and



the factors they do not have control over. Concern for failing schools signifies that the principal in *Big Brother* views the unequal demographic composition of students in schools to be a predictive factor of student performance as measured for school accountability purposes.

The principals' perceptions of *Big Brother* and *Missing the Point* regarding school review diverge from the principal in *Out of Control*, who found the experience supportive and constructive overall. The principal in *Getting Results* expresses a preference for school review guidelines that focus on improvement and are consistent with the educative purposes of schools. The principal in this case believes the *School Review Framework* is an improvement on previous iterations of accountability policy because it does manifest these characteristics. This point of view suggests principals prefer authoritative policies, which reflect quality professional practice and knowledge.

The description of district directors as box-tickers in *Big Brother* implies the belief that district directors are instrumental in the implementation of accountability processes, but do not necessarily influence or have power over these to the extent that they can alter them. The emphasis on compliance discussed by this principal is consistent with a bureaucratic-managerial style of accountability that seeks to monitor providers of service. There is a note of cynicism in *Big Brother* as the principal reflects on the political nature of the accountability processes of the Department and the ramifications for schools like *Out of Control*, *Take Your Time* and *No Accounting for Parents* with prejudicial demographics.

In the case of *Just Tell Me*, the authority of district directors connects with power in a micro political sense. The principal acknowledges district directors have personalities, preferences and individuality. The principal's desire for recognition, approval and endorsement relate to interpersonal and reputation matters, commensurate with the power and authority of the process and person conducting it. Specifically, the principal ascribes importance to pleasing the district director, knowing that this is helpful in ways beyond the school review process.

Like the principal in *Just Tell Me*, the principal in the case of *Finally* seeks approval from the district director. Approval validates the principal and provides the sense that work is valued. This is in addition to the sense of satisfaction intrinsic to goal achievement and working with teachers who share a sense of purpose as they go about accountability related work. This perceptive approach to working in a hierarchical organisation could be beneficial when there is a problem in the future and ensures an ongoing cordial dialogue. This might be advantageous to the principal, creating a reputation amongst colleagues and positive impressions about the principal.

The district director in *Role Limitations* does not associate the district director role with compliance or scrutiny for political purposes. In *Coaching the Novices*, the district director is a believer in the use of evidence as the basis for planning and implementing teaching strategies, strategies to improve the school and to inform beliefs about student achievement. The district director indicates that the Department uses the system assessments, such as WALNA, to identify schools whose students make average, above or below average progress. To help individual students make the best possible progress

however, the district director advocates that each individual school collect student performance information. The district directors' expectations are that teachers will use the information about student achievement to improve their teaching.

Reminiscent of the compliance regime referred to in *Big Brother*, the district director in *Coaching the Novices* acknowledges that the Department scrutinises the student information. This district director's primary concern however, is for schools to be able to do this with reliable evidence about student learning and bring about better student achievement. The district director is aware that not all schools consider validity and reliability when they select assessment strategies and tests, both of which the district director considers to be important. The district directors' views on schools' use of student performance information are exemplified by the principal's description of school self-assessment practice in *Getting Results*, which contrast with other principals' accounts. School improvement, according to this principal, occurs through the attention of staff to information about student achievement. External impetus for improvement such as school review in this secondary school context does not rate a mention.

Principal concern, cynicism and reservations about the purpose of accountability and scrutiny of schools by the Department suggest distrust or fear of consequences arising from accountability processes. A belief that accountability processes can result in consequences indicates they have power. The source of power has further implications for implementation of accountability processes and the outcomes. The scepticism of some principals (*Big Brother*, *Missing the Point*) suggests that the accountability policy's authority derives from its legislative underpinnings rather than expert

professional knowledge. The importance of school review to the principal in *Just Tell Me* demonstrates the legitimate authority of the process, which derives from the policy. The principal is intrinsically motivated to improve the school and school review is not required as a motivating or monitoring tool for this purpose.

A dichotomy between a bureaucratic-managerial type of accountability and expert professional knowledge emerges from principals' and district directors' comments about what makes schools improve. The principal in *Accounting for Difference* works collaboratively with the school's team of teachers and education assistants and the whole school works towards shared goals. This, along with sufficient resources and school stability, is sufficient motivation to bring about school improvement. There is no shortage of evidence and information to demonstrate the school's performance. This school functions around a professional - ethical imperative where professional expertise and peer judgements are more influential than the Department's accountability processes. The school does implement school assessment as an effective tool but is exempt from the scrutiny associated with state-wide testing due to the 'difference' of the students. This allows the school to remain out of the managerial – bureaucratic target range and concentrate on teaching and learning without the imperatives of publicised, tested achievement.

The accountability policy and focus is adversarial to the principal of *Missing the Point* who has an orientation to professional knowledge and experience and articulates dissonance between his beliefs and the demands of the current accountability system. Respecting and trusting the opinions of teachers, the principal in *Missing the Point*

believes teachers are a sufficient guide to what students are achieving and the key to helping them do better. The principal has more confidence in teachers' judgements than information from WALNA. Again, this indicates the principal's orientation towards professional accountability and resistance to a bureaucratic-managerial approach.

The school review model used in *Just Tell Me* aligns with the principal's professional orientation, goals and motivation. The authenticity of the model is appealing because it places each principal with colleagues and the line manager in classrooms as part of the process, affording enhanced ownership. The principal is willing to embrace the uncertainty of this scenario, which is difficult to 'stage-manage', because of a belief in its utility and benefit to the school. Uncertainty in the context of the principal's previous experience of school review was not as tolerable to this principal because of an anticipated need to 'pass' and a perception that dissonance with the district director might affect the 'pass mark'.

The manner in which the latest district director (*Just Tell Me*) implements school review has elements of 'Director as Coach', referred to by the district director in *Coaching the Novices*. It suggests that the district director focuses on getting principals to develop their own understandings in order to be more effective in their roles. This district director is implementing school review in a manner that directs principals' attention to the business of educating and this is consistent with a professional rather than bureaucratic approach to accountability. The principal in *Getting Results* implements school self-assessment with teachers using a similar approach.

The successful implementation of school self-assessment is consistent with an expert professional orientation. Teacher involvement in school improvement is a characteristic of the school in *Getting Results*, which the principal attributes to a strategic focus on student achievement. The principal uses the system-wide mandatory testing results as evidence of what students can do, acknowledging that this can be uncomfortable for teaching staff. This focuses teachers on the need to improve. It is not the sole motivating factor that the principal relies on, however, to gain teachers' commitment to change. This principal uses and responds to information about levels of student progress as well as levels of achievement. This is consistent with the improvement focus of the school and the relevance of information to make judgements about improvement.

The implementation of school self-assessment in *No Accounting for Parents* loosely connects to school improvement but the orientation of the processes appears aligned to a compliance impetus. The principal indicates the accountability processes are not directly relevant to parent concerns, which is consistent with low educational achievement of parents. The principal describes a school context with multiple, competing teacher goals and an absence of cohesion in school accountability related activities. In fact, teachers appear to engage in accountability related activities at one level and administration at another level. The two groups seem to be engaged in looking at information separately from each other.

Whatever the parents' levels of engagement, their concerns are centred on the affective dimensions of their children's well-being. The principal, however, perceives that the expectations of school accountability are to do with academic performance and the focus

on student health and well-being reported by the principal does not appear central to the school's self-assessment process. This indicates a number of possibilities including the failure of the accountability process to focus the school's attention, the significant impact of instability in schools and the capacity of the school staff. The district director of *Role Limitations* espouses a different perspective.

The district director in *Role Limitations* demonstrates a professional orientation through a keen interest in supporting struggling schools and seeing the district director as instrumental to bringing change through orchestrating and providing support.

Acknowledging it is desirable that a school's priorities are contextually relevant, the district director demonstrates inclinations towards a professional perspective. The district director is disappointed when recommended interventions, which would make a dramatic difference to schools, fail to attract systemic support. Such disappointment reveals some inflexibility and unresponsiveness on the part of the system to recommendations for improvement, which seems anomalous to the intention of the mandated accountability processes. There is synchronicity between the lack of systemic response the district director describes, and the perception by the principal in *Big Brother* that school accountability is primarily about monitoring schools and achieving compliance over improvement.

The district director of *Role Limitations* also articulates a belief consistent with a bureaucratic-managerial approach, which calls schools to account for outcomes rather than inputs. The district director believes student performance relates positively to teacher performance and advocates schools address both issues as part of the school's

endeavour to improve student achievement. The district director advocates measuring and monitoring both teacher and student performance once schools have identified what standards of performance are required to meet their targets. This district director's belief raises, but does not resolve, the question of how to measure and improve aspects of teacher performance that relate to student achievement.

Both district directors expect schools to decide their priorities and to support this with evidence, target setting, planning and implementation of strategies to address their needs. School communities want to know whether their school is a good school and the district director in *Role Limitations* recognises this and believes an outsider lends an authoritative voice on the issue. Accountability to the individual school community is not a matter of emphasis in district directors' practice of school reviews however. Principals owe accountability to the district director as a representation of the senior executive of the Department.

This district director in *Role Limitations* acknowledges school context factors and implies that a school's priorities reflect the context. He or she expects that schools will identify their priorities based on some evidence and address students' needs. This expectation is contradictory to the perception of the principal in *Missing the Point* and puts the onus on schools to identify a range of additional tools that have the necessary reliability to measure achievement and performance. The Director in *Coaching the Novices* shares this district director's belief that school review can be effective in some circumstances. Both district directors are aware that their role and their practice need to be responsive to the needs of schools. The *Role Limitations* district director believes the



role matters although not necessarily in the way it is intended. The district directors' narratives are indicative of the tension between a professional and bureaucratic orientation although the role is instrumental in implementing a policy with managerial orientations in a political context.

Inconsistencies between policy and the beliefs of educators contribute to school resistance in policy implementation, such as in *Missing the Point*. Resistance occurs when educators do not respect a policy, believing it is not professionally authoritative. The district director in *Role Limitations* acknowledges the diverse needs of schools and the limitations of systemic policies. This was evident in the principal's response to school review in *Accounting for Difference*. *Out of Control* and *Just Tell Me* illustrate systemic incongruity undermining the adoption of policies.

The school's response to accountability in *No Accounting for Parents* is perfunctory. The reason for this might relate to the capacity of staff; the principal indicates the school is relatively unstable in terms of teacher-tenure longevity. These circumstances could focus the resources of the school towards developing teachers' level of competence, particularly if they are beginning teachers. Unlike some schools, this school operates from a beginning point of severe disadvantage. Improvements in this and other schools such as *Out of Control* and *Take Your Time* would need to be exponentially superior to the most advantaged schools to achieve similar results in student performance. This school's low student achievement, indicated by state-wide literacy and numeracy tests is indicative of a number of associated social issues.

The school appears to require further development before the embedded cycle of school self-assessment described by the district director in *Coaching the Novices* becomes evident. The principal appears to be leading a response to the requirements of the accountability document rather than implementing a school self-assessment process to improve students' achievement. Like many of the other principals, this principal interpreted the accountability policy and shaped a response. Unlike some of the other principals' schools, this context involves inexperienced staff and significant ongoing changes.

### **Chapter Review**

The district directors have concerns in *Coaching the Novices* and *Role Limitations* that the school self-assessment and the school review processes are not clearly understood by principals nor some district directors and so there is a good deal of variation across the state. The principal in *Just Tell Me* concurs and wants clear direction about the review process. This principal emphasises the school review process, ascribing significance to the outcome beyond student achievement. Thus the principal in *Just Tell Me* acknowledges the power and authority dimensions of the process.

Some principals, such as in *Missing the Point*, contest the validity, reliability and scope of the measurement tools used to determine students' achievement by the Department. Principals, including the one in *Big Brother*, are suspicious of the uses to which the Department may put student achievement data. These principals have witnessed changes to the Department's accountability emphases and they lament the reduction of trust in professional judgments in favour of standardised data. Other schools use such

measurements and additional methods and see them as integral to improving student achievement in a focused way: *Getting Results* for example. Other principals contest the parameters of student achievement, believing school performance is about more than literacy and numeracy.

Tension between a bureaucratic-managerial and professional approach to accountability emerges. There is divergence, shared perceptions and contradiction between and within groups of principals and district directors, illustrating the collision of the two approaches to school accountability. The school self-assessment process aligned more closely with the ideals of professional accountability than school review. Principals, in some cases, interpreted school review as a coercive manifestation of political power and approached it with suspicion.

Several narratives illustrate the compatibility of the school self-assessment process with a professional approach to school accountability. The cases *Getting Results*, *Just Tell Me*, *Finally* and those of both district directors, emphasise the contribution of teachers, led by principals, to school improvement. Cases such as *Accounting for Difference*, *Take Your Time* and *Out of Control* indicate the school self-assessment processes can take different demographic contexts and student populations into account in a way that school review cannot. The process can be aligned to a range of criteria where the accountability policy and its interpretation make this possible. In the case of *Out of Control*, the district director's flexible approach to school review at variance with the experience of some other schools, and the minimal school improvement cited by the

school principal, indicates neither process is a fail-safe method of bringing about school improvement.

Amongst the diverse points of view and experiences of school accountability narrated here, there is a sense of agreement that whatever is expected of schools needs to relate to students so teachers can see the relevance of the policy. Teacher commitment is requisite for improvement so principals need to work closely with staff. There is also a message that some principals perceive a mismatch between policy and practice and some question the suitability of an accountability policy that fails to account for the range of school contexts across the state. There is a strong theme of the district director visit being an event, which adds workload and pressure to the principal. District directors and principals on the other hand, view school self-assessment as beneficial, involving a culture of self-reflection and subsequent action, which, improves school performance when implemented.

Together the narratives show similarities and contradictions in the way school principals understand and implement school self-assessment. School circumstances are relevant to the success of school self-assessment processes in bringing about improvement. The nature and extent of improvement in disadvantaged schools starts from a point of additional barriers to student performance, over which schools have varying degrees of control. The school review process is polarising; the narratives illustrate a range of views about its purpose, utility and future. School review purports to validate a school's self-assessment, which determines the degree to which a school is improving its performance. In the chapter to follow, I examine further the experiences of these

principals and district directors in the light of the literature pertaining to school accountability. The final chapter explores a number of implications for policy in addition to implications for practice and further research.

## Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

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### Overview

This study set out to determine how **school self-assessment** and **school review**, the two major aspects of school accountability in the Western Australian public school context, impact on the practices of educators and bring about improvements for students. This study looks at how some principals and district directors of public schools in Western Australia perceive the nature and purpose of school accountability processes. The study examined ways in which schools implement the school self-assessment and school review aspects of accountability policy of the Western Australian Department of Education and Training. A number of themes emerged from analysis of the data contributed by participants, both principals and directors, indicating considerable variation of understanding exists about Department accountability. Variations of policy-implementation fidelity (Elmore, 2005) were evident, with distinctions between school self-assessment and school review processes made by most participants.

This chapter deals with the findings of the study. Following a brief précis of recent trends in accountability, I discuss the emergent use of power and authority by the Department as schools implement accountability policy. I describe limitations to the study and make several recommendations for further study. The findings indicate consideration be given to improve the efficacy of the school review process in particular, which links closely to participants' perceptions of barriers to school improvement. The chapter closes with implications for policy development by the Department and the conclusion.

## **Discussion and Findings**

**Power relationships.** Like the rest of Australia, Western Australia public schooling is in the process of aligning accountability policy to politically driven reforms experienced in other developed countries (Lam, 2001). Recent changes such as the introduction of standards reviews and an Expert Review Group (Western Australia. Department of Education and Training, 2008a) into the Western Australian public school system are indicative of a coercive approach to school accountability. These changes extend the managerial, bureaucratic characteristics of school review and distance accountability further from a professional approach. The introduction of standards reviews and an Expert Review Group by the Department, indicates that previous accountability processes have not satisfied the expectation of school improvement associated with them. The nature of these changes to accountability and their implementation is consistent with an orientation, of the Department, to control (Codd, 2005; Sachs, 2001), in as much as school personnel are obliged to implement politically instigated policy and procedures.

The Federal Government elects to use coercive methods and exerts its will on the State Government by funding compliance (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008). The Department, headed by a Director General of Education, responds to the directions of the State Government through the Minister for Education. In Western Australia, there are a number of employees located in the capital city of the state. They constitute the central office for the Department and assist in responding to government directions through policy and resourcing (MacNeill &

Cavanagh, 2008). The hierarchical nature of the Department can facilitate coercive practice, which in accordance with policy attributes theory (Desimone, 2002), would lead to policy implementation for the duration of the associated rewards and sanctions. This may take the form of coercion by politicians of the Department's senior bureaucrats and then from the district level to school principals and thence to teachers. Desimone (2002) states that teacher support is essential for reform or positive change to occur in schools. However, whenever sanctions, including negative peer reactions, are associated with policy non-compliance, power and politics are involved. Processes meant to make policies authoritative, may operate through power, which culminates in weak and short-term policy implementation (Desimone, 2002).

This study found distrust and suspicion amongst some experienced principals about changes to accountability policies. Some principals perceive accountability processes as mechanisms that produce a culture of compliance. These views contrast with their expectations of school cultures in an era of decentralisation, devolved authority and shared decision-making. Lam's (2001) analysis of decentralised school site administration offers a managerial explanation; school site administrators have increased accountability to the central, district or board office for the efficient expenditure of resources under devolved models.

Given the contradiction of external inspection and honest disclosure (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005), it is not surprising that the school review process creates anxiety and apprehension. The principal of *Big Brother* doubts that compliance-oriented accountability can lead to improvement. In doubting, the principal will be unable to



assist teachers to appropriate a connection between externally originated initiatives for change (Leithwood, et al., 2002) associated with compliance and their professional purpose. In a school where student achievement was cause for concern, a culture of compliance would be harmful as it could lead to teachers behaving in a more controlling manner and teaching their students less effectively (Leithwood et al, 2002).

Furthermore, the normative structures of schools can limit the success of bringing about change through mandating policy or introducing new compulsory practice (O'Day, 2002).

The degree to which policy generates authority by representing expert knowledge is contestable (Resnick, 2006). Resnick asserts that it is easier to measure power than authority and suggests that Desimone's analysis leaves much to be investigated in the area of authority and policy implementation. Like Desimone, Resnick (2006) distinguishes between power and authority. She states that authoritative policies are required, not merely those with powerful consequences. The extent to which accountability policy is authoritative rather than coercive is predictive of its successful implementation (Desimone, 2002). McDermott (2007) argues that much of the movement of power through standards based reforms in education increased federal and state authority. She highlights the disparity between intentions of accountability policies and implementation effects, asserting that wielding power through sanctions will not be sufficient to bring about change in schools. Schools must also address deficiencies in their capacity improve.

**Bureaucratic-managerial accountability.** The school-level accountability changes (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999) associated with efficiency, economic productivity and accountability (Lam, 2001) are consistent with the philosophy of the new managerial or bureaucratic approach (MacNeill & Cavanagh, 2008). Scheerens and Demeuse (2005) question the capacity of the structures associated with this approach to bring worthwhile change where it is needed in education whilst noting managerial or bureaucratic approaches reinforce top-down mandated change through hierarchical structures. The extent to which schools enact this accountability approach is variable. There is particular irony in the district directors' experiences of school review. They report their experience as frequently defaulting to a role of coach rather than school reviewer. This is precisely the aspect of performance evaluation that may bring about change in people's actions, provided the coaching is done skilfully and the 'coachee' is willing (Normore, 2004). However, it is not consistent with a managerial approach to accountability.

Some principals in the study convey the sense that they comply with mandated accountability processes but they do not believe this will benefit their students. The principal in *Accounting for Difference* reports onerous preparations for school review, which reinforces the school staff's belief that they are effective but does not add to their effectiveness. These reported experiences of principals resonate with the contention of researchers such as O'Day (2002) that attempting to inculcate change by enforcing compliance may be unsuccessful. Furthermore, Elmore and Fuhrman (2001) point out that policy does not account for the complex reactions that occur in organisations.

Bureaucratic-managerial approaches to accountability typically involve testing students to gauge the sufficiency of the students' levels of achievement and, by default, the adequacy of the school's instructional program (Doran, 2003). The *Role Limitations* district director's expectation that schools have targets and ways to measure student and teacher performance so they can determine whether improvement has occurred, aligns to a managerial accountability context. The principal in *Missing the Point* notes the new emphasis on standardised tests, their significance for judgments about a school's effectiveness and the prominence of student outcomes. School-based educators can supposedly use the information to help them in improving student performance.

Improvement is different from achievement because growth rather than performance is the criteria for success (Brown & Ing, 2003). This observation concurs with the value-added analysis of student achievement data that has achieved currency (Roberts, 2006). Principals confirm in several instances that the focus of the Department accountability processes is improvement, albeit driven by the emphasis placed on improvement by individual district directors. However, the principal in *Big Brother* is sceptical and implies that schools where student achievement is poor will be disadvantaged under the school accountability policy, irrespective of improvement.

There is currently a managerial-accountability focus on compliance in Australia (Angus et al., 2007) and some principals in this study describe experiences consistent with such a focus. They communicate tension between the purpose of accountability policies and their own beliefs about the purpose of schools. One of the harmful practices that may occur in compliance oriented accountability environments (McTigue & Brown, 2005) is

the narrowing of curriculum or a reductionist approach to teaching. A principal in this study identified this as a concern in connection with the emphases of school review. The many changes alluded to by the *Big Brother* and *Missing the Point* principals are consistent with a shift from professional accountability to a bureaucratic-managerially motivated accountability policy.

**Professional accountability.** The counterpoint to managerial, bureaucratic accountability is a view of education as a moral endeavour and belief that its moral purpose should not be subjugated to a 'rule-based' system (Codd, 2005). Among teacher and principal adherents to a professional approach are many who believe they are foremost accountable to their students and parents (Leithwood et al., 2002). Amongst participants in this study, was a principal who recognised a misalignment between expectations and concerns of parents and the principal's own understanding of the core purposes of education, that is, academic achievement. Whilst addressing accountability to parents, their expectations did not represent sufficiency of performance in this case. This principal was one of several who did not subscribe to apprehension about school accountability.

The experience of many participants indicates faith in school self-assessment processes but considerable reservation about the school review process and its capacity to make a positive difference to students. The school self-assessment process is more compatible with a professional orientation to accountability than school review. The current emphasis in the field of school improvement is to build the capacity of schools to

improve through self-evaluation or school self-assessment, distributed leadership and participation (Willoughby & Tosey, n.d.).

The effectiveness of teaching, and its relationship to student achievement, is a critical issue in school self-assessment that leads to improvement for students (Gopalan & Weinbaum, 2000; McKinsey & Company, 2007; O'Day, 2002). Likewise, the success of School self- assessment relates to the degree that it generates and focuses attention on information relevant to teaching and learning (O'Day, 2002). School cultures that support the development of skills such as analysis, reflection, communication and collaboration (Neil & Johnston, 2005) are integral to the success of school self-assessment processes. Additionally, when there is a sense of connection to purpose, teachers are motivated (Elmore, 2005). All the principal participants engaged in some form of school self-assessment but with differing opinions about consequential school improvement. The principal in *Getting Results* depicts successful school self-assessment whereby teaching staff made changes to their teaching practice encouraged by a school culture that was both collectively reflective and required change.

Elmore (2005) suggests strong internal accountability is crucial to bringing about sustained school improvement. Internal accountability occurs when individuals align their values to the collective expectations and the collective expectations have greater influence on practice than individual's values. Thus, cohesion and alignment to organizational goals can occur. Elmore (2005) states that schools are more effective in the presence of cohesion and alignment than in their absence due to the internal

accountability that develops amongst groups of individuals. This process allows the work of school leaders to become explicit reinforcement of organizational values.

The principal in *Getting Results* can demonstrate school improvement using school self-assessment practices. The principal and teachers of this school have a collective sense of agency. Like the narrative *Finally*, a number of conditions were favourable but this principal actively engaged in defining the school's own improvement needs, designing the improvement efforts and evaluating whether efforts met those needs. These practices and sense of agency by staff members are likely to lead to sustained improvement (Creemers & Reezigt, 2005). Elmore (2005) also notes that schools with high internal accountability appear to be associated with greater success in the context of external accountability than those with lower internal accountability. A perception of one's self as a 'locus of control' or belief in one's individual 'agency' is integral to internal accountability and a commitment by individuals to being influenced by colleagues (Elmore, 2005).

Some writers (Leithwood et al., 2002) claim that connection to accountability processes by teachers is essential before it is possible to link any cohesive school improvement to externally originated initiatives for change. It is necessary to embed ownership of self-evaluation processes in school practice and inculcate thorough understanding of purpose by all involved (Neil & Johnston, 2005). However, when teachers perceive a discrepancy between their goals and those of the system for which they work, superficial implementation of accountability processes is the result (Leithwood et al., 2002). The *Big Brother* narrative illustrates this scenario and implies that the school's response to

the Department accountability policy is specious and disconnected from the staff's sense of purpose.

Louis, Febey and Schroeder (2005) discuss the difficulties of educator attachment to the status quo. They emphasis the necessity of sense-making and warn against interpreting slow change as lack of capacity. Connected with sense-making is agreement with the intentions of the change, the capacity of organisations to make change and the perceived ability to resist control by those requiring change. The principal in *Finally* articulates the challenge of convincing teachers to perceive preparations for school review as important or purposeful. The principal indicates that the school self-assessment process provides a focus and the accountability framework is a useful reference point for considering a range of school performance indicators. The principal in *Finally* claims that broad support and involvement from teachers is occurring but notes this has taken many years to achieve. The experience of this school suggests there may be tensions arising from the professional orientation of the teachers and the bureaucratic orientation of school review in particular. The importance of collective engagement with policy is emphasised by Louis, Febey and Schroeder (2005) who state that opportunities for sense-making depend upon the culture, resources and leadership available. Sense-making is necessary to give educators opportunity to modify their individual beliefs and attitudes through collective reflection.

The issue of equity received comment in this study around the impact of accountability processes on the practices of educators and their capacity to bring about improvements for students. Several principals opined that school reviews confirm what principals

already know but the process does not trigger sufficient resources to address the identified causes of low achievement in some schools. Resnick (2006) associates the standards based reforms with attempts at achieving equitable outcomes for low socio-economic students. The principal in *Take Your Time*, with a low socio-economic community context, articulates a view that school review needs to be about additional support for a school in such circumstances. Leonard and colleagues (2004) question whether there are sufficient resources made available to achieve the outcomes expected of education in Australia. Adequate resources such as staffing make other forms of support more successful (Lee & Wong, 2004). The *Role Limitations* district director's view that the school review process has an important part to play if a district director can align resources to a school in difficulty is consistent with a professional accountability approach but runs counter to an accountability system with an emphasis on regulation.

**Policy fidelity.** The discussion of tensions around approaches to accountability has already revealed differences in the implementation of accountability policies by both district directors and principals. This discussion considers school self-assessment followed by matters related to school review, barriers to achieving policy fidelity and the desirability of doing so in a managerial, bureaucratic accountability context.

Leithwood (2005) stresses that good leadership is a condition for positive change and suggests that significant school improvements or reforms do not happen in the absence of such leadership. School leadership plays a pivotal role in achieving school improvement through teachers (McKinsey & Company, 2007). To achieve this, principals can shape the collective culture of a school and engage teachers in forming



collective expectations (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999). One principal in this study articulates awareness of this and describes the steps that were necessary to reconcile the accountability policy and useful accountability practices for implementation by staff members. Strong leadership by principals and at district level is characteristic of successful schools (Desimone, 2002). A district director in this study admits to an aberrant interpretation of the district director role, indicating disagreement with other district directors who assess school performance rather than validate Schools' self-assessments. This occurrence suggests low policy fidelity amongst directors, principals and their schools.

A focus on the activity of teachers in classrooms along with capacity and evidence of schools being able to identify when improvement has occurred aligns closely to the likely success of school self-assessment and its relationship to student achievement (Gopalan & Weinbaum, 2000; O'Day, 2002). The capacity of schools to identify improvement when it occurs is consistent with recommendations that schools plan improvement and evaluate their effort (Creemers & Reezigt, 2005). However, Leithwood, Jantzi and McElheron-Hopkins (2006) suggest neither improvement plans nor the processes used to derive them are what make for improvement to student outcomes. They identify staff development, the ability of the school to learn from new ideas and problem-solve, and structures that support collaboration as the aspects of school improvement which impact on students.

This study indicates school self-assessment occurs to varying degrees in schools. District directors question the extent to which teaching staff participate in and implement school

self-improvement strategies. The district director in *Coaching the Novices* credits a lack of teacher involvement and ownership to the principals' limited participation in accountability practices as a teacher. This district director does not see self-assessment processes in schools that involve teachers in a meaningful way. The response by the district director in this case is to work with principals on understanding and implementing the Department's accountability processes; both school review and school self-assessment. The district director in *Role Limitations* acts similarly.

Improvement of schools requires consistency, clear policies and policy fidelity. For schools characterised by low socio-economic status, context-specific interventions may be necessary. Consistency is one determinant of how likely policies are to be implemented (Borman, 2002; Desimone, 2002). This study shows the implementation of school review by district directors to be variable, suggesting low consistency. A lack of coordination through system levels of education creates major obstacles to long-term improvement and for school improvement to be sustainable, support and consistency across multiple levels is needed (Desimone, 2002). Desimone (2002) reports district level assistance, which helps schools navigate conflicting policy messages from multiple levels, is beneficial where schools are seeking to bring about improvement through reform. Deviations between reviews in schools and districts undermine the trust of school principals in the review process. The view of the principal in *Just Tell Me* indicates a lack of consistency in the conduct of school reviews in Western Australia. This principal talks about conflicting messages from different district directors and a lack of consistency in school review requirements. The *Finally* principal's comments, distinguishing between school review and school self-assessment, suggest an evaluative

emphasis by district directors conducting school review that is not consistent with the views of the director participants of this study.

Notwithstanding the importance of policy consistency, the specificity of accountability policies is linked to their successful implementation (Borman et al., 2002). Specificity refers to the clarity of the policy along with defined responsibilities and clear articulation of actions (Epstein, 2005). The district director in *Role Limitations* identifies deficiency in understanding of the school review aspect of school accountability, which is indicative of insufficient specificity. This district director explains the district director role over a five-year period has involved building the understanding of school staffs. The school review process relates to the outcomes of the self-assessment in which schools have engaged. The district director indicates this is an area in need of greater understanding to facilitate implementation. While some school personnel may not understand the role of school review, the district director and the distinctions between school self-assessment and school review, the district director in *Role Limitations* does not necessarily extrapolate these deficiencies in understanding to an absence of successful school self-assessment practice. Similarly, the district director in *Coaching the Novices* reiterates issues surrounding principals' understanding the purpose of school review. This district director suggests a relationship between the inexperience of small school principals and their limited understanding.

A further potential barrier, which prevents realisation of policy fidelity, is the stability of the policy and contextual factors (Borman et al., 2002) over time (Gross & Supovitz, 2005). Schools with high staff transition rates do not enjoy sufficient stability to

implement policies effectively (Borman et al., 2002). The conditions enjoyed by the school in *Finally* contribute to the recent cohesive efforts by the teaching staff. The school is stable and the capacity of the teaching staff considerable. The *Out of Control* principal refers specifically to inadequate staffing resources and the limitation and frustration of seeing poor achievement despite implementing school self-assessment processes and participating in school review. This principal's frustration is consistent with the view that school self-assessment does not generate resources necessary to bring about improvement. This school appears relatively unstable with factors beyond resourcing contributing to a lack of improvement. Some claim that schools cannot improve unless they are stable (Leithwood, 2005) and that change can be dysfunctional and destabilising for schools.

Reynolds and colleagues (2006) report that, for improvement to occur in schools facing exceptionally challenging circumstances, context specific interventions are most likely to bring about improvement. Improving low socio-economic or disadvantaged schools is more difficult than non-disadvantaged schools (Reynolds et al., 2006). Furthermore, some schools may require external assistance (Gross & Goertz, 2005). This study demonstrates that the extent of improvement brought about by school self-assessment processes varies depending upon the circumstances of each school. Principals of schools in challenging circumstances report small improvements, if any, in students' academic achievement. The *Role Limitations* district director refers to the Department accountability policy as 'one-size-fits-all' indicating this is an inadequacy given the large number of schools requiring differential support. The schools in *Out of Control*,

*What Parents Want* and *Take Your Time* are examples of schools in the ‘requiring differential support’ category.

The capacity for peer-collaboration, trust between teachers and collective responsibility for student learning are the distinguishing characteristics of low socio-economic schools that improve (O’Day, 2002). This study did not reveal instances where this was evident. The *Out of Control* school diverts its resources away from teaching and learning to the non-attendance of students. Similarly, the experience and expertise of the teaching staff challenges the principal of the school in *What Parents Want*. The principal refers to student attendance, behaviour, and a lack of sophistication amongst the parent body in educational matters. The principals of both these schools indicate that they have school self-assessment processes in place but significant improvement is not evident as a result.

The District Director in *Accounting for Difference* regrets that support is not always forthcoming as a result of school review and notes that the role of school reviewer, and hence school review, makes little difference to schools where school self-assessment is occurring. In the words of Abelmann and Elmore (1999, p. 42) “new accountability systems will succeed to the degree that they consider the sources of variability and explain their impact on the way schools respond to external demands”. This study found that school review and school reviewers are not routinely responsive to the range of school contexts and types of school. This finding raises further questions about the purpose and utility of school review.

Overall, a number of factors appear to inhibit the achievement of strong accountability policy implementation. Subscribers to a professional accountability orientation or a balance with managerial approaches might consider this advantageous for students. A reduction of student achievement to universal equivalents in the form of test results (De Lissovy & McLaren, 2003; Pignatelli, 2002) is part of a managerial approach to accountability increasingly evident in the Department's schools (MacNeill & Cavanagh, 2008; Meek, 2001). Should schools achieve high fidelity with accountability policies, the effects noticed in other countries with similar policies and contexts are likely to occur in Western Australia. These effects include, but are not limited to, a less comprehensive education (Leonard et al., 2004; Riffert, 2005) and greater emphasis on test skills (Lashway, 2001). However, this study shows considerable divergence between the Department's accountability policy and its implementation in schools. This applies to the bureaucratically aligned school review process and the more professionally aligned school self-assessment processes.

### **Limitations**

This study focused on principals, as a critical nexus in translating policy to practice, with some perspectives from directors. The perspectives of teachers would have given additional indications of the effect of accountability policies and the degree to which they influence teacher practice. Teacher perspectives would add information about how the actions of principals influence accountability practices in schools and the extent to which teachers adopt, ignore, sabotage or adapt accountability mandates in their classrooms. The views and perspectives of other school leaders such as deputy principals and literacy specialists would have also reflected perspectives on the use, collection and

understanding of student achievement data and the practice of teachers in contributing to school improvement.

The study is a snapshot of school accountability, bound in time and context rather than longitudinal and the findings and conclusions reflect this. The study is based on a sample of convenience, which is neither random nor stratified, and this influences the generalisability of the findings.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Three directions for further research into ways in which schools implement accountability policies in Western Australia's public schools are recommended. Firstly, the implementation of policies about student improvement in schools with challenging circumstances in Western Australia is an area for further investigation. The unique circumstances of these schools indicate a range of interventions and strategies is necessary to address significant difficulties in achieving satisfactory student achievement. An examination of the extent to which existing interventions have succeeded and the nature of effective interventions for the most challenging schools in Australian contexts is a starting point for further examination. Likewise, additional investigation of ways to bring about conditions for improvement such as stability, consistency and policy fidelity would benefit staff and students.

Secondly, since embedding school self-assessment in school processes is likely to support improvements to student learning, research is needed to find ways of making professional accountability processes part of school cultures. Practices that achieve

whole school commitment to school self-assessment processes, in a range of contexts, are an area for further study and development. While there is considerable literature on change management in schools, further attention could be paid to how small schools, large schools or K-12 schools, for example, might achieve comprehensive and improvement-producing self-assessment practices in their context. The contributions, concerns and experiences of other school leaders, such as deputy principals, would furnish other understandings about school accountability and its impact. Teachers and deputy principals may have intimate knowledge, and use of, student data. They are likely to be integral to school target setting, planning and strategies to achieve collective purpose amongst teachers in schools.

Thirdly, more information is needed about how principals respond to changing accountability policies. Longitudinal studies of principals' changing beliefs, values and practices would help district directors and the Department's planning executives offer appropriate support and guidance to principals at different stages of their careers. Furthermore, policy change and other matters related to principals and the effects of accountability policy over time might be explored. Additional research involving cross-sectoral schools and policies of school accountability could add to the body of knowledge about accountability, as could studies of primary and secondary schools and novice principals juxtaposed with experienced principals.

### **Implications for Policy Development**

Accountability policy is likely to facilitate improvement when school administrators can coordinate a range of signals about accountability to achieve coherent local policies



(Normore, 2004). Where schools do not have school leaders with sufficient skills to bring school staffs to collegiate and cohesive action, improvement is jeopardised. The implications for practical policy development are to develop the strengths of school leaders in the area of achieving strong organisational cohesion and cultures of reflection. This study suggests that there is a place for principal development through, for example, professional coaching.

The quest for continual improvement can be exhausting, so attention to developing the capacity of leaders to manage change is a further practical consideration. Principals' knowledge of assessment, measurement and evaluation of student achievement emerged as an area where there is considerable variation. School and district leaders require sufficient skills and knowledge to interpret and act on accountability information, to achieve policy fidelity within and across schools. Attention to the capacity and development needs of staff would inform district director and principal-led discussions and planned responses to accountability data.

Further development of a theoretical framework for the successful implementation of policy to encourage and promote agency amongst school leaders and teachers is highly desirable. Such a framework needs to promote a balance between encouraging innovation, maintaining cohesive schools and indicating sufficiency of student achievement. Articulation of the conditions necessary for successful policy implementation through a framework and strategies to achieve change with collective ownership would assist directors and principals in attending to matters that might present barriers to school improvement. Such a framework would assist policy makers,

counteracting the tendency to design policies for 'average' schools but neglecting the exceptions or the schools with exceptional circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

A key finding of this research is that school self-assessment is more likely to support improvement to student achievement than school review. This is consistent with school leaders' beliefs about the purpose of schooling and acknowledges and values contextual factors. Further education of school leaders and systemic support would be useful to build reflective school cultures that embed school self-assessment practices in the minds and actions of teaching staff. School self-assessment is more likely to bring about change in schools than any form of external audit because school self-assessment aligns more closely to attributes that predict sustainable policy implementation. School self-assessment processes in this study have worked through persuasion rather than coercion (Desimone, 2002).

Western Australian public schools in challenging circumstances do not improve to an acceptable level in either student achievement or affective measures to a sufficient extent through school self-assessment and require alternate assistance, particularly where the issues are endemic in the community. Of equal importance, however, is the development and resourcing of schools in challenging circumstances to a point where they are able to develop the agency requisite to engage in productive self-assessment. School review may not be useful to schools in these circumstances; it may simply confirm what is already known. The capacity of the school review accountability process to offer support and relevance to the variety of schools in the Western Australian public

system is limited. Support and relevance are critical to the success of accountability policies because success is contingent on the way schools respond to policy (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999) and there is a great deal of variation amongst Western Australian public schools. Support needs to include professional development for principals and teachers. This is a key factor in the adoption of school reform policies or systemic efforts to improve student achievement (Desimone, 2002). The school review process is not sufficiently oriented towards helping schools improve and the process appears to be open to interpretation by district directors.

Barriers to successful accountability policy implementation include ambiguity of purpose, inconsistent implementation and a subsequent compliance approach by some principals. The Department's school review process, recently changed to a standards review, is a form of external audit, viewed variously by principals in this study with distrust, irrelevance or utility other than that which its policy parameters admit. Some principals are questioning the authority of the accountability policy with regard to the extent that it represents expert knowledge (Resnick, 2006).

This study finds, in the context of the Western Australian public schools studied, that school self-assessment impacts more positively on the practices of educators and brings about more improvements for students, than school review. Neither principals nor district directors indicated strong conviction about the capacity of school review to make a positive difference to school performance and improvements for students. School self-assessment was used to varying extents to bring about changes to teacher practice although this did not bring about significant improvement to schools in very challenging

circumstances. Consistent with an orientation to professional accountability, principals and district directors share some understandings about the nature and purpose of school accountability processes. The current managerial, bureaucratic nature of educational accountability policies generates dissonance and influences the way in which principals and district directors implement accountability policy.

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Appendix A

Notification of Human Research Ethics Approval

**COPY**

 <p><b>MURDOCH UNIVERSITY</b> PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA</p>	<p><b>HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE</b></p>
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NOTIFICATION OF HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

Chief Investigator:	Dr Helen Wildy	Mary Duggan
Title of investigation:	Gauging school performance and effectiveness: School accountability in the Western Australian public school sector.	

Form Received:	23 September, 2005	Date form resubmitted:	
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Decision of Human Research Ethics Committee:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Approved	Permit Number:		Valid until: 31 December 2005 *
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Approved subject to conditions below	Permit Number:	2005/176	Valid until: 31 December 2005 *
<input type="checkbox"/>	Not approved, additional information required as outlined below			

\* Permits are granted for a period of three years subject to provision of an annual report and renewal request in December of each year.  
 \* If the project is discontinued before the expected completion date this should be reported to the Research Ethics Office and the Adverse Events form submitted.

All conditions listed below must be addressed and replies provided to the Education Research and Academic Programs Office **BEFORE** final approval to commence work is given. Responses can be e-mailed to [D.McShane@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:D.McShane@murdoch.edu.au) or by letter to ERAP Secretary Dianne McShane or Chair, Expedited Review Committee, Dr Lindy Norris, School of Education, Murdoch University 6150.

**NO** work can commence until all conditions have been met and final written approval is received by the researcher.

- Please provide letter from DET indicating approval for the research to be undertaken.

In accordance with the NHMRC guidelines on human experimentation, as a condition of the approval of your human research ethics application you are required to report immediately anything which might affect ethical acceptance of your project's protocols, including:

- Adverse effects on subjects;
- Proposed changes in the protocol;
- Unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

Chair Signature (Dr Lindy Norris):  ..... 3 October 2005

X:\Education\Research, A. And. Programs\DHRE\ETHICS COMMITTEE\Student approval forms\approved or not approved or conditions\W 154 Duggan 2-10-05.doc

## Appendix B

### Letter of Consent and Information to Participants

Associate Professor Helen Wildy  
School of Education  
Murdoch University

Dr Wendy Cumming-Potvin  
School of Education  
Murdoch University

Project Title: Gauging School Performance and Effectiveness: School Accountability in the Western Australian Public School Sector

As a Masters student at Murdoch University I am investigating the accountability process used by the WA Department of Education and Training in public schools under the Supervision of Assoc. Professor Helen Wildy and Dr Wendy Cumming-Potvin. The purpose of this study is to gauge the impact of the school accountability process on public schools in Western Australia. It is anticipated that it will contribute to broader understanding of the school accountability process in Western Australian schools.

You are invited to participate and share your perspective of the accountability process by consenting to participate in an interview. It is anticipated that the time needed for an interview will vary from forty five minutes to an hour and a half. The duration of the interview is entirely negotiable and participants may withdraw at any stage without disadvantage.

Participants can decide to withdraw their consent at any time. All information given during the survey will be protected, stored under secure conditions and treated as confidential and no names or other information that might identify you will be used in any publication arising from the research. Feedback on the study will be provided to participants in the form of a summary of the data collected about school accountability processes in schools. On completion of the study, audio tapes are to be stored in a locked cabinet at Murdoch University for five years.

If you are willing to participate in this study, could you please complete the details below. If you have any questions about this project please feel free to contact either myself, Mary Duggan, on 91685969 or my supervisors, Associate Professor Helen Wildy 9360 6000 or Dr Wendy Cumming-Potvin on 93602192.

My supervisor and I are happy to discuss with you any concerns you may have on how this study has been conducted, or alternatively you can contact Murdoch University's Human Research Ethics Committee on 9360 6677.

\*\*\*\*\*

I (the participant) have read the information above. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this activity, however, I know that I may change my mind and stop at any time without disadvantage.

I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law.

I agree for this interview to be audio taped

I agree that research data gathered for this study may be published provided my name or other information which might identify me is not used.

Participant/Authorised Representative:

Date:

Investigator: A/Professor Helen Wildy

Date:

## Appendix C

### Endorsement of Proposed Research



Department of Education and Training  
Government of Western Australia

Your ref:

Our ref:

D005/230829

Enquiries:



Ms Mary Duggan  
Manager District Operations  
Kimberley District Education Office  
PO Box 2142  
BROOME WA 6725

Dear Ms Duggan

#### APPLICATION TO CONDUCT SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS

Thank you for your email dated 6 October 2005, in which you request permission to conduct research in Government schools.

On behalf of the Western Australian Department of Education and Training I endorse the proposed research to be conducted for the purpose of completing your Masters studies at Murdoch University.

The policy relating to research in Government schools can be viewed on the Regulatory Framework.

Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention.

Yours sincerely

SHARYN ONEILL  
A/DEPUTY DIRECTOR GENERAL, SCHOOLS

17 NOV 2005