School Leaders' Perceptions of the Drivers and Impediments to Site-Based Innovation

by

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Statement of Originality

I, Maurice Brunning, hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision.

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

Signature .....

Name Maurice James Brunning

Date 6 December 2017

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Glossary

Distributed leadership

This concept covers both system, district, and within-school approaches to sharing and devolving leadership responsibilities. SBM is taken as a form of distributed leadership but it might be more precisely described as "devolved leadership." Some literature confuses SBM and the various approaches to and definitions of distributed leadership, to the extent of using them interchangeably. Matters such as shared decision making and shared responsibilities could be considered as both SBM and distributed leadership.

Innovation

Innovation can be considered with a broad remit or it can be based on a more focused view:

"A phenomenon that ranges from continuous improvement of existing practices through to transformation of how we achieve goals, or rethinking what those goals are." (Victorian Education Department website)

Beswick et al. (2015) considered the difference between invention and innovation:

> Essentially, invention and innovation are two sides of the same coin – the yin and the yang. They complement each other and build on each other, yet in some ways are incredibly different. For while invention seeks to build on existing knowledge, to make something new or different; *innovation seeks to create lasting synergies and solutions.* In other words, invention looks at the 'what,' innovation looks at the 'how' (p. 5).

Local Schools, Local Decisions

The NSW Government's school based management (SBM) reform policy (colloquially called the 229 program). Introduced in 2012 and established as the blueprint for increased local management of all public schools in NSW predicated on the provision of increased local decision making and included increases in staffing and financial flexibility, the latter being based on the Resource Allocation Model (RAM).

NSW Department of Education

The NSW Department of Education (DoE) is a very large public education system and spans the support, funding, and governance of more than 2,200 schools that are spread across an extensive geographical area. It is the direct employer of all personnel (including school principals) who work in the NSW public education sector. The Department reports directly to the NSW Minister for Education.

NSW Secondary Principals Council (SPC)

The SPC is an active professional association that only NSW secondary and central school principals may join (www.nswspc.org.au). Its standing in the education profession in NSW is high. It has wide political and professional influence in NSW public education but can also work at the level of the individual principal if needs be.

School-based management (SBM)

There appears to be no definition of SBM that comprehensively covers the needs of this study, the outcomes of which promote SBM as a complex matter. The closest approach was from Dimmock (2013) who posited that the aim of SBM was to "devolve more powers and decentralise responsibilities to the school level" (p. 13). More detail about a working definition of SBM is provided in Chapter 2 – Literature Review.

Tri-level reform

A concept often referred to by Michael Fullan (2010) indicating that effective change strategies require actions and synergies from system, district, and school levels that provide an “allness” (his term) for reform strategies. The importance of these ideas is strengthened in Fullan and Quinn’s most recent text (2016) emphasising the importance of Coherence.

List of Abbreviations

ATSI	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
DoE	NSW Department of Education
HSC	Higher School Certificate
LSLD	Local Schools, Local Decisions policy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SBM	School-based management
SPC	NSW Secondary Principals Council
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Abstract

In this thesis I interviewed eight experienced secondary principals about their perceptions of the drivers and impediments that were impacting their capacity to innovate, with particular reference to the place of school-based management (SBM). Given the practically oriented, context-specific, and focussed nature of this study's research questions, the seniority of the participants, and the inevitable complexity of detailed discussions about educational leadership with experienced principals, a multiple case study approach was used to provide maximum opportunity for meaningful outcomes. The methodology employed Mears' "gateway approach" (Mears, 2009) to delve deeply into the complex matters raised by the participants.

The evidence indicated that there was a significant imbalance between the number and relative importance of the positive drivers and the constraining impediments participants were faced with managing. Impediments far outweighed supportive drivers. At the school operations level, change was recognised by the participants as extraordinarily complex and the forces affecting it, highly interdependent and often frustratingly outside the influence of principals. Too few of the "right" types of drivers were well enough understood or implemented by the system—"wrong" drivers were clearly in evidence (Fullan, 2011).

In order to cope, participating principals indicated that they were using a broad, sometimes unconventional range of strategies to manage what they saw as an excess of system-generated impediments and shallowly devised and poorly implemented government initiatives. In contrast to the system rhetoric on the value of localism and the need to support difference, the majority of system policies were in effect instruments

for maintaining centralised control. They claimed that the current top-down, centralist, compliance-based policy milieu constrained their leadership, effectively placing a ceiling on “real-world” effectiveness.

The participants’ views about the success of SBM as a reform were mixed. The extent of their local authority was unclear and its nature and scope insufficiently defined and understood to allow genuinely sustainable school-based innovation. They posited that to improve their situation, the system would require a deeper understanding of change processes, how they operate in functioning schools, and an acceptance of shared responsibility for ensuring that sustainable change was achievable.

Participating principals indicated that government and system goals such as increases in effective innovative practice and lifts in student achievement metrics were conceivably achievable. However, such achievements would be difficult without construction of a system culture where purpose, process, and responsibilities were agreed across all levels of the public education sector.

While the study was limited to a relatively small number of secondary principals in one system, the participants’ statements left little doubt that a principal’s capacity, determination, experience, and ability for professional networking could all impact on the success of their staff and students. Viable solutions to local problems entailed “working around” system constraints. Pursuing the “art of management” was discussed as a pre-requisite for any principal who aspired to achieve innovative outcomes and survive the demands of the role. The participants’ professional organisation, the NSW Secondary Principals Council (SPC), and professional networking were seen as vital to meeting the challenges of leading and managing their schools.