Strategy and the Principal

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BTeach/BSocSci GradCertPTT MLMEd MACEL

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education

Faculty of Education and Arts

The University of Newcastle

Newcastle, Australia

November 2008

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work contains no material which has been accepted 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 this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research, the greater part of which was completed subsequent to admission to candidature for the degree.

Scott Eacott, 19 November 2008

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the people and organizations whose assistance made this research possible. Firstly, I thank Associate Professor James Ladwig, for his advice, assistance, encouragement, support and honest feedback in successfully completing this project. His insights ensured that I achieved my goal, but also learnt and enjoyed the process.

Secondly, I would like to thank the participants in this research who gave up their valuable time. Particular mention must go to John Mather (Regional Director for the Hunter / Central Coast) for giving me access to public primary school principals through their regular meetings and supporting this research in his weekly newsletter to staff.

Experiences such as this do not come about without the support of an extended group of people, a number of whom are fellow doctoral students on similar journeys. This support and my thanks also extend to Professors Terry Lovat, Phil Foreman and Jenny Gore for their unquestioned support during some of my toughest days of candidature. Additional thanks to the academic and administrative staff of the School of Education, particularly Alison Russell and Susan de Sain, whose assistance made the process all the more smooth.

I would also like to thank my parents, Robert and Margaret for instilling in me a love for reading and learning. But most importantly, I thank my wife Amy for her patience and understanding in this and previous academic endeavors which have brought me to this point. Finally I would like to acknowledge my children, Daniel and Madelyn who have yet in their short lives to experience a dad who does not tuck them into bed, kiss them goodnight and then get to work on the computer, typing away into the night.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis builds on and contributes to work on the strategic role of educational leaders, and particularly public primary school principals. Although some in the field (Bell, 2002; Forde, Hobby, & Lees, 2000; Kelly, 2005) have questioned the utility of strategy as a concept, particularly with its ties to economics, marketing and capitalist ventures, there has not been an explicit research focus of what strategy means in educational leadership. As such, this thesis provides additional insight by taking stock, assessing and integrating the existing body of literature on strategic leadership and management in schools and by going beyond what is already known and setting forth new frameworks, perspectives and researchable questions. The analytical focus on the strategic role, and not merely strategic management or strategic leadership enables another contribution. Multiple modes of inquiry were used in constructing the arguments of this work.

Through a theoretical and methodological analysis of the discourse on the strategic role in 18 prominent educational leadership journals over a 27 year period (1980-2007), a model for the strategic role was developed. This model was tested on a sample of public primary school principals in the Hunter / Central Coast region of New South Wales, Australia. The results of this questionnaire based study prompted further inquiry as to what the 'strategic role' means to practitioners. A framework was developed from the transcribed texts of interviews with principals. Many similarities existed in this framework and the literature derived model, however the framework developed from practitioner responses gave greater attention to the social forces that act upon the strategic role, supporting the criticism directed at the utility of the narrow view of strategy as planning to the educational context.

Theoretically informed by the work of Michel Foucault, a proposed alternate lens for the analysis of the strategic role of school leaders is presented, showing that as a result of increased participation in school governance and accountability regimes, principal actions are constantly under surveillance. While not being the first to bring Foucault into the educational leadership discourse, the proposal of the strategic role within a social space is something that has been missing from the discussion on the strategic role within the field. The Foucauldian frame sheds need insight into the strategic role of the public primary school principal and highlights the significance of the role within the field of educational leadership. Overall, this thesis is intended to provide a new platform for theory and research on the strategic role of school leaders. As with Anderson and Grinberg (1998), this thesis argues for Foucault's concept of disciplinary practices as a metaphor for the field of educational leadership. It is argued that by positioning the strategic role within the broader social space, further inquiry can help provide a fundamental understanding of how and why educational institutions behave the way they do.