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**LOCAL SCHOOL MICROPOLITICAL AGENCY:  
AN ANTIDOTE TO NEW MANAGERIALISM**

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## **LOCAL SCHOOL MICROPOLITICAL AGENCY: AN ANTIDOTE TO NEW MANAGERIALISM**

Bruce Johnson<sup>\*</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper outlines research into the micropolitical strategies used by five school leadership teams in the South Australian School-Based Research and Reform Project. The research results challenge many of the orthodoxies of educational managerialism. For example:

- The use of leadership teams made up of teachers, coordinators and senior school leaders reflected a commitment to distributive leadership and very flat leadership structures in each of the schools (rather than 'line management' structures).
- The leadership teams promoted key values as the driving force for reform (rather than leader-inspired 'visions of reform').
- Leadership teams used non-linear and evolutionary planning approaches that were negotiated closely with participants (rather than 'strategic planning' approaches to goal setting driven by school leaders).
- The main vehicles used by leadership teams to further their schools' reform work were local action research and regular, dedicated staff workshops (rather than directives and accountability regimes).

The paper analyses local school reform initiatives through a micropolitical frame. I argue that micropolitical knowledge and insight are critical to the development of school practices that use the 'positive politics' (Blase 1988) of negotiation, collaboration and conflict resolution to address issues of local concern in schools, rather than the 'controlling politics' of new managerialism.

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## INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the widespread ‘reforms’ in education in most western countries over the past fifteen years. Economic rationalism and its companion, new managerialism, have been the defining ideology and technology that have been used to regulate education in the interests of promoting national economic competitiveness in the deregulated, global marketplace (Yeatman 1990; Marginson 1997; O’Brien and Down 2002). The ‘reforms’ have affected schools through new demands for greater efficiencies and accountability just at a time when teachers’ and principals’ ability to control and manage the factors that impact on these is seemingly diminishing.

Yet despite all of the constraints on principal agency brought by new managerialism and the uncertainties of postmodernism, local school communities and teachers themselves expect their school leaders to ‘make a difference’ to the schools they lead. Clearly, contemporary school leaders are caught in a paradoxical situation in which they are simultaneously required to act in the interests of local students and staff *and* to pursue broader social and economic imperatives required by power groups preoccupied with achieving global economic competitiveness (Thomson 1999). While some commentators and researchers focus on the constraints that this paradoxical situation seems to impose (eg Blackmore 1995), others explore the range of choices open to school leaders within a clearly difficult context. As Day, Harris and Hadfield suggest,

The capacity of leaders to make a difference will, then, depend upon their interpretation of and responses to the constraints, demands and choices that they face. Goldring (1997) argues that effective leaders ... must know how to span boundaries in order to promote information and resource control. At the same time as they negotiate the constraints of internal and external environments, they must capitalise on the many opportunities for making choices. (Day, Harris and Hadfield 2001b: 34)

This paper explores the ‘contradictory possibilities’ for local reform that are present in contemporary schools. In particular, it looks at the possibilities for increased teacher participation in school decision-making processes, flatter and more flexible leadership structures, and the dilution of the rhetoric and practice of new managerialism. It does this from a ‘micropolitical’ perspective.

## **THEORETICAL ORIENTATION: THE MICROPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

‘Micropolitics’ is generally viewed as a relatively new field of study; as a consequence, its conceptual boundaries and distinctive features are elusive and contested. However, Blase (1991) provides a useful working definition of the field:

Micropolitics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations.

In large part, political actions result from perceived differences between individuals and groups, coupled with the motivation to use power to influence and/or protect. Although such actions are consciously motivated, any, consciously or unconsciously motivated, may have political ‘significance’ in a given situation. Both cooperative and conflictive actions and processes are of the realm of micropolitics. Moreover, macro- and micropolitical factors frequently interact. (Blase 1991: 11)

Various literatures support the idea that schools are ‘intrinsically political in that ways must be found to create order and direction among people with potentially diverse and conflicting interests’ (Morgan 1986: 142). For example, studies of policy and curriculum implementation (eg Fullan with Stiegelbauer 1991) have established that political bargaining is common as teachers and ‘change agents’ negotiate the ways proposed new curricula are adapted to suit local contexts. Similarly, studies of school restructuring (eg Peters, Dobbins and Johnson 1996) have documented the struggles between entrenched coalitions of power who defend their control over ‘the timetable’ against other groups of teachers who seek a looser scheduling of the curriculum. Finally, studies of school leadership have described ‘the everyday micropolitical facilitative strategies and personal characteristics of exemplary principals who have influenced and enhanced teachers’ sense of empowerment’ (Blase and Blase 1997: 138). These diverse literatures combine to construct schools as political entities.

As Blase and Blase (1997) point out, there are several perspectives on the micropolitics of schools in the professional literature, yet most focus on how individuals and groups influence others to further their objectives. Importantly, some studies have focused on the micropolitics of cooperation (ie collaborative, collegial, consensual and democratic interactions) as well as the more frequently studied conflictive forms of interaction in school settings.

The study reported in this paper aimed to analyse the local school-based reform initiatives of five South Australian schools through a micropolitical lens or frame (Bolman and Deal 1991; Telford 1996). A micropolitical frame was used to identify and label six school-level strategies that were used by leadership teams to initiate the reform process, negotiate the purposes and operating details of the reforms, build collaborative coalitions, and respond to various forms of opposition and resistance to the reforms. It provides a strong argument against depicting school leaders as inert 'captives' of broader macro-level directives or managerialist policies by demonstrating the capabilities of school leaders and teachers to make strategic choices to initiate significant school reform and restructuring at the local level.

### **BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH**

The paper presents data from five schools that participated in the School-Based Research and Reform Project. The project was funded by South Australia's Department of Education, Training and Employment with the support of the Australian Education Union (AEU), and was conducted in partnership with the University of South Australia. The project quite explicitly built upon the collaborative approaches to workplace reform undertaken in South Australian schools through the Innovative Links Project (Yeatman and Sachs 1996) and the National Schools Network (Peters, Dobbins and Johnson 1996).

#### The School-Based Research and Reform Project

- funded schools or clusters of schools with a declared interest in action research as an approach to solving organisational and/or educational problems;
- formed networks of schools centred around common approaches to research and workplace innovation and reform;
- strengthened collaborative working relationships between teachers, school leaders, university academics, union representatives and professional officers of the department.

The School-Based Research and Reform Project commenced in May 1998 when more than twenty schools joined the project. A further 19 schools commenced work in February 1999. Most schools committed to three years' involvement in the project.

To support local action research activity and the processes associated with implementing innovative workplace reforms, key staff from the project schools were involved in 'roundtable' meetings convened twice a term by teacher educators from the University of South Australia. The 'roundtable' metaphor was used as a powerful

device to convey to participants notions of collegiality, egalitarianism and collaboration. Participants literally sat around a big table as ‘equal partners working on an ongoing basis to achieve mutually beneficial goals’ (Frymier, Flynn and Flynn 1992, quoted in Stewart 1997: 31). At a practical level, the ‘roundtable’ approach provided participants with opportunities to

- seek and receive support for their action research initiatives
- exchange ideas and information
- have *time* to think, plan and reflect away from the demands of school life
- critically appraise others’ reform agendas
- write about the realities of school-based research.

Yet it was this final task that revealed a fundamental weakness in the project: schools’ inability to portray the local micropolitical work of leadership teams that promoted school-based reform. In schools’ written accounts of their projects little was said about how individuals and groups pursued their interests and purposes, how power was exercised, and how political actions were implemented. Indeed, when schools’ written accounts were scrutinised closely, they appeared to be overly rational and logical, sanitised, apolitical and unproblematic stories of school reform which lacked authenticity and veracity; they largely ignored issues of power, influence and persuasion at the local level. In fact, they differed significantly from the informal—and essentially private—accounts of what happened in schools that were shared during coffee breaks in ‘roundtable’ meetings.

In order to break the silence over the micropolitics of local school reform, further opportunities were offered to schools to explore ‘the formal and informal power of individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organisations’ (Blase 1991: 11).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Selection of schools**

Of the 39 schools that participated in the project, five were invited to contribute to further research into the micropolitics of their work. Selection criteria included:

- evidence of successful innovation and workplace reform since being involved in the School-Based Research and Reform Project;
- openness of members of the project leadership team to discuss their thinking and decision making about the project;

- diversity and representativeness: care was taken to include schools at different levels and with different organisational arrangements.

The following five schools agreed to take part in the research:

Eastern Fleurieu Reception–Year 12 (R–12) School

- a large middle-class rural R–12 school; 1100 students and 74 staff; multi-campus organisation
- research and reform focus: transition from primary to secondary school
- project leadership team: 3 assistant principals (2 female, 1 male), coordinator and middle school teacher (both female).

Mansfield Park Primary School

- low socioeconomic status (SES) metropolitan primary school; 310 students and 21 staff
- research and reform focus: work restructuring and curriculum reform
- project leadership team: principal (male), deputy principal, coordinator and teacher (all female).

Seaton High School

- low SES metropolitan secondary school; 600 students and 44 staff
- research and reform focus: assessment and reporting
- project leadership team: principal, deputy principal (both male), coordinator and teacher (both female).

Reynella East High School

- large middle-class metropolitan secondary school; 1050 students and 71 staff
- research and reform focus: enterprise education
- project leadership team: assistant principal (male), 2 coordinators (1 male, 1 female) and teacher (female).

Athelstone Junior Primary School

- middle-class metropolitan junior primary school; 140 students (aged 5–8 years) and 12 staff
- research and reform focus: work restructuring
- project leadership team: principal, 2 teachers (all female).



### **Focus group interviews**

Project leadership teams were provided with a set of questions about the initiation and conduct of their project prior to the face-to-face focus group interviews. This was so that they could reflect on the political dimensions of their in-school work and be prepared to engage in discussions about it. The following questions probed Blase's (1991: 11) dimensions of micropolitical activity:

- What were the goals, interests, preferences or purposes that individuals and groups pursued?
- What decisions, actions, events and activities were undertaken by individuals and groups in pursuit of their interests?
- Who decided these issues? Who decided who decided?
- Who benefited from these decisions and actions? How and in what ways? Who decided who would benefit?
- Who missed out? Who was marginalised or ignored by these decisions? How and in what ways?
- How intentional, calculated and strategic were these actions?
- How subtle and covert were these actions or related non-actions?

Focus group interviews were conducted in participants' schools by a member of the university team who had insight into the reforming work of the school.<sup>1</sup> Each focus group was given a transcription of its interview for comment and follow-up discussion. In two cases (Eastern Fleurieu and Seaton), second interviews were conducted to elaborate on points made in the initial interview.

### **MICROPOLITICAL STRATEGIES**

In the discussion that follows, six micropolitical strategies used by project leadership teams are identified:

- distributed leadership: how leadership of the projects was negotiated and dispersed beyond ascribed leadership positions;
- establishing moral purpose: how leadership teams used key values to define and defend the rationale for reform;

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1 Interviews were conducted by Rosie Le Cornu, Judy Peters and Bruce Johnson from the University of South Australia, and Peter Mader from the Department of Education, Training and Employment.

- finding space: how leadership teams protected teachers from other demands and helped define their perceived ‘decision-making space’;
- using ‘evidence’: how leadership teams used action research to generate ‘evidence-based’ arguments for local school reform;
- negotiating operational details: how leadership teams involved teachers in collaborative and developmental activities along a school improvement ‘journey’;
- dealing with resistance: how leadership teams identified different forms of resistance, what they thought caused it, and what strategies and tactics they used to deal with it.

### **Distributed leadership**

From the inception of the School-Based Research and Reform Project, participating schools were encouraged by the sponsors of the project to form leadership teams made up of teachers, coordinators and senior school leaders. This expectation was strongly advocated by one of the project’s partners, the Australian Education Union, as it was consistent with its longstanding commitment to promote participatory and democratic workplaces for its teacher members. To further this end, schools’ applications to join the project had to be signed by both the principal of the school and the school’s local union representative.

The driving force behind each project was the project team formed to lead and manage the reforming work of each school. As can be seen from the school profiles above, membership of these project teams varied. So too did the criteria used to recruit key staff. When asked how staff were recruited to the school’s project leadership team, the principal of Seaton High quite openly admitted ‘coopting’ the Year 8 coordinator to the leadership team because the reform work was seen to be part of her domain of responsibility in the school and because she had the ‘power’—positional and personal—to lead the reform. These considerations were quite overtly discussed by the leadership team during the following exchange.

Principal: The idea was really evolving at Year 8 and 9, but there was certainly an issue at Year 10 too. But it was going to need someone to take it on. It had to be someone who would take it on as something that they were really passionate about and they really wanted to get organised and have a go and do it.

Deputy Principal: I think it worked because we had [the Year 8 coordinator] in the position really driving it supported by [the

principal] and [Year 8 coordinator] had been in that position as the Year 8 coordinator for at least a year. ... She's got a lot of personal power but she's also Year 8 coordinator and she's not backward in sort of using that to provide leadership and to set some expectations. A lot of things have happened quickly and will because [the Year 8 coordinator] made sure they happened.

Interviewer: Do you want to comment on that, [Year 8 coordinator]?

Deputy Principal: You wouldn't disagree with that would you?

Year 8 coordinator: I've become really passionate about things like if I think something is a really good thing to do then it's going to happen so I did use my positional power as a Year 8 coordinator to get the presentations up. It couldn't have been someone else; I had the release time to go away and do it and I had the admin support to do it. But I also tried to use the positional power I had to support the staff who were doing it as well and to involve them because the only way these things actually get off the ground is if your staff believe in it as much as you believe in it.

Other staff with less obvious responsibilities for aspects of the reform proposals were 'encouraged' to join the leadership teams for other reasons: it was their 'turn' to accept some leadership responsibilities beyond their classrooms, they represented sections of the school that should 'have a say' about the proposed reforms, or they possessed the technical or political skills needed to guide the evolution of the project.

Whatever the case for the recruitment of specific members, all of the leadership teams were committed to 'distributive leadership' beyond formalised positions of ascribed leadership. Once in place, the leadership teams operated with flat leadership structures and surprisingly candid, open debate. There was little evidence of hierarchies of positional power controlling who spoke when or about what. In fact, some of the interactions between members of the leadership teams about the history of their work, who made what contributions, and who did 'all the work', reveal many good-natured and humorous exchanges between participants that cross positional roles. In many cases, gently 'stirring' or humorously 'sending-up' each other served to over-ride issues of rank and status based on ascribed positions of authority in the school. It seems that egalitarianism 'ruled' within most leadership teams.

Several project teams also acknowledged the leadership role of teachers in ways that positioned teachers as more than just the implementers of others' ideas or directives. At Eastern Fleurieu School, for example, one of the assistant principals maintained that

the leadership potential from our teaching staff is huge and I think they take it on board really well. What I really like seeing is introducing the ideas and then people take on the leadership and they will run with something and then talk to others about what they've done and share their resources. I think that's the power of the whole thing. The absolute power is with the teachers. It's just really we guide them along the way.

In summary, issues of shared leadership (Hallinger and Richardson 1988; Jackson 2000) or distributed leadership (Mawhinney 1999; Beatty 2001) were explicitly addressed within the project, partly because it was a requirement for selection but more importantly because each leadership team acknowledged the advantages of 'spreading the leadership load' beyond those in senior leadership positions. There was widespread agreement that leadership teams would have to 'guide' the reform process but that teachers and year level coordinators would play significant roles in these teams. Notwithstanding this, school leaders candidly admitted using micropolitical strategies and tactics to select key staff to join these teams and to set the tone for their operation.

### **Establishing moral purpose**

The social and educational context in which the School-Based Research and Reform Project operated exhibited many of the difficulties and ambiguities associated with postmodernism—'the collapse of moral and scientific certainties' (Hargreaves 1994: 70), for example. Yet interestingly, in an era of moral uncertainty, leadership teams in four of the five schools studied invoked moral arguments embedded in conceptions of 'what is good for children and adolescents' to justify their reforming activity.

For example, the principal of Mansfield Park Primary maintained that the socially and educationally disadvantaged students at his school were poorly served by conventionally organised schools; he argued for 'different ways of doing things':

I suppose it was about sowing seeds about different ways of doing things here. I strongly believe that things need to be done in a different way to try to meet the needs of the sort of students that we've got here. So it was about trying to create an environment where people would take some risks and try some different things. Now some of the things

we did were probably not the right things but, in a sense, it was a way of opening up and freeing people to say, ‘well look, okay, we can do this in a different way’. I wanted people to be willing to do things ‘out of the square’ to try to meet the needs of our kids because mainstream schooling isn’t what these kids need. (Principal, Mansfield Park Primary School)

In trying to promote an innovative and risk taking school culture, the principal inferred that current practices did not serve the interests of the students well and that changes were necessary. Underpinning his position was a moral commitment to promoting the educational and social wellbeing of the students at Mansfield Park.

Similar statements were made by the advocates of reform in the other schools. The middle school coordinator at Reynella East High recalled not having ‘our finger on the pulse of what kids were doing’.

We were questioning how effectively our middle school kids were learning. We felt that perhaps we weren’t catering for the needs of the kids because they were in large groups, they didn’t really have clear identities, they didn’t feel like they belonged—they were lost, I guess. We were grappling with ways of developing and improving their learning more than anything. (Middle School Coordinator, Reynella East High School)

At Seaton High, the ‘problem’ that needed to be addressed was the negative impact on many aspects of school life of low student and teacher expectations.

We were concerned about the reaction to kids who achieved academically—the harassment that they felt. This was part of a wider problem with lower expectations. Teachers used words like ‘our clientele’, or ‘the nature of our clientele’ which were just codes for masking lower expectations of our kids. So we started to coin the phrase ‘a culture of achievement’ to try to get at a number of things to do with raising everyone’s expectations. (Principal, Seaton High School)

While adopting an apparently noble and honourable role—articulating what was perceived to be ‘wrong’ with the status quo and what needed to be done to promote the interests of students at the schools—the advocates of change were also quite pragmatic and strategic in their use of moral arguments to promote their cause. They were very

aware that ‘change for change sake’ would not be supported by weary and cynical teachers who had been part of huge change initiatives in curriculum, student behaviour management practices, and school organisation (among other things) during the 1980s and 1990s. As the middle school coordinator at Seaton High revealed, she stressed the

real positive vibes about what we were doing and why we were going about doing it and that it wasn’t just change for change sake. There was a reason for doing it and the reason was the benefits for the students. (Middle School Coordinator, Seaton High School)

She went on to emphasise the importance of others recognising the need for reform.

You have to realise there’s something here that’s not right ... because if there isn’t that need, that ‘staring you in the face’ need to change something, then people aren’t going to bother. (Middle School Coordinator, Seaton High School)

Appealing to teachers’ sense of moral purpose and articulating almost non-contestable (at least publicly) views about the primacy of student interests in schools was a significant micropolitical strategy employed by the promoters of change in most of the schools. As one leader explained, establishing a ‘bottom line’—a values position about ‘doing better for the kids’—provided a non-negotiable rationale for widespread and deep reform.

I think in the decisions that have been made since this school was established, the bottom line has always been ‘how is it going to be better for kids’ because if it’s not better there is no point in doing it. This was the proviso the school was established on. We need to actually be doing better for kids, not even just as well. Why would we go through all this if we were only going to do as well; we’ve got to be improving outcomes for kids. (Head of Campus, Middle School, Eastern Fleurieu R-12 School)

The use of moral language to frame the reform (having a ‘slogan’ and using it repeatedly, according to the leadership team at Seaton High School) implicitly points to the power of language to ‘discipline’ teachers by constructing ‘an official reality that discounts real conflicts of interest’ (Blase and Anderson 1995: 126). The internalisation of the ‘correct’ moral rationale for reform was a subtle form of control through self-regulation which replaced the need for explicit hierarchies of power in the schools. As Riehl observes,

Numerous theorists (e.g., Bourdieu, 1991; Cherryholmes, 1988; Foucault, 1980; Gee, 1990) have explicated the discursive nature of social practices and, conversely, the nature of language as a form of practice. That is, language use is inextricably connected to rule-based actions that define reality, generate meanings, and constitute social forms and relations. (Riehl 2000: 78)

Members of the leadership teams in the study schools consistently combined ‘a discourse of hope’ with forms of educational criticism and critique that problematised aspects of established practice (Giroux 1992: 242). Despite all the apparent constraints on action at the school level, they still thought that they could ‘make a difference’ to the school experiences of the students they taught. Their positive sense of efficacy (Bandura 1997) enabled them to withstand the ‘ironic, paradoxical and perverse’ components of the postmodern era that weaken moral certainty by collectively negotiating forms of ‘situated certainty’ based on the needs and demands of their particular contexts (Hargreaves 1994: 47). In short, they ‘refused to capitulate to collective uncertainty and let [their] schools be moulded by the marketplace’ (Hargreaves 1994: 59). However, that is not to deny their strategic micropolitical use of moral rhetoric as a ‘disciplining’ device that framed and restricted what could and could not be legitimately debated within the reforming agendas of the schools. Those with discursive power used it well to establish what was valued and highly sought after in each school.

### **Finding ‘space’: synthesising and prioritising ends and means**

It is one thing to declare and promote the moral purpose of a desired reform, and quite another to devote the time and space needed to work towards achieving it in overloaded and often stressed workplaces. There is little disagreement in schools or in the literature that teachers and school leaders are being required to ‘do more with less’ under new political and administrative policies that involve:

- increased devolution (Blackmore 1995);
- widespread school restructuring (Peters, Dobbins and Johnson 1996; Lingard and Limerick 1995);
- new mandated change and performativity regimes (Blackmore 1997; Knight and Ehrich 1998);
- compressed timelines due to calls for ‘accelerated change’ (Hargreaves 1994);
- greater social and emotional work due to the stress and dislocation brought by multiple changes (Blackmore 1995).

Blackmore argues that it is paradoxical that

state bureaucracies, in seeking certainty in an era of uncertainty, have produced highly modernist responses (hierarchical, individualised, fragmented, technical, impersonal, instrumental, non-reflexive, unilateral) to postmodernist demands (flexibility, change, emotional management, teamwork, listening, nurturing, interpersonal competence, coping with value conflicts, gaining self knowledge, embracing error), the former leading to conformity to bureaucratic norms rather than innovative bureaucratic leadership. (Blackmore 1999: 114)

Yet it is the plight of teachers caught up in demanding curriculum reform, school restructuring and outcomes accountability that is of greatest concern to Hargreaves. In the conclusion to his influential book on teachers' work in the newly emerging postmodern era, Hargreaves (1994) acknowledges that 'teachers know their work is changing, along with the world in which they perform it', but worries that so long as

the existing structures and cultures of teaching are left intact, responding to these complex and accelerating changes in isolation will only create more overload, intensification, guilt, uncertainty, cynicism and burnout. (Hargreaves 1994: 261–262)

It was within this uncertain, challenging and overcrowded educational environment that the study schools embarked upon their reforming initiatives. Because of the multiplicity of challenges confronting the schools, it is not surprising that one of the key tasks of the leadership team in each school was to demonstrate that the school had the 'space' in their busy schedules to actually undertake the work associated with the proposed reform. They did this by synthesising and summarising current commitments to provide an overview of the school's 'extra' work (beyond usual classroom work) and to position the new project within a coherent school plan for reform. In the case of Eastern Fleurieu R–12 School, this was done by the school leadership team under the guidance of the principal.

We knew that teachers were strung out too far, so we went through a process of putting a big piece of brown paper out on the table and plotting all the things we knew that we were involved in that were above basic teaching and learning stuff. It was an awesome looking thing but we tried to get it all into some sort of perspective. Then our



principal, who has a wonderful lateral and visionary mind, drew the bits together that we were grappling with and came up with almost a three-tiered overlay. And once he did that, we could actually make the connections between all the bits and pieces we were doing. It was really refreshing, I think, to see the connections. He really drew all the bits together and once we got our heads around that, we took it to the staff and showed where all the bits were going and how that they needn't feel overwhelmed by it all because they were working on this bit and somebody else was working on that bit and they dovetailed together. (Head of Campus, R-6 School, Eastern Fleurieu R-12 School)

Similarly, at Mansfield Park Primary, the leadership team saw the need to establish a set of priorities for action because the 'nature of the place' meant that 'there was an incredible amount of pulling at people to go in different directions for different reasons' (Principal, Mansfield Park Primary School). They decided to close the school for a day and use a facilitator to help them 'thrash out' their priorities.

The catalyst that helped us prioritise what we needed to get into was a school closure day that we had with an external consultant. She actually ran us through a process where we literally spent the whole day going through a very set way of grappling with all the issues that we had in this place. We gradually whittled it right down until we came up with what was the top priority for this school. (Deputy Principal, Mansfield Park Primary School)

While these two approaches appear to conform with the principles of strategic planning (Bell 1998), a less conventional micropolitical strategy was employed by members of the leadership team at Reynella East High School to ensure that teachers had the time and energy to devote to the reform project. They actively 'protected teachers from external interference' (Fider 1997: 33) by acting as the 'gatekeepers' of innovation and change. The leadership team proudly reported challenging the visiting Chief Executive Officer of the state education authority about the potential impact on their school of a new curriculum framework. They sought reassurances that the new framework would not see an end to their 'freedom to experiment in curriculum delivery'. In standing so publicly for local decision making, the leadership team supported Day, Harris and Hadfield's contention that 'leadership means respecting teachers' autonomy, protecting them from extraneous demands' (Day, Harris and Hadfield 2001a: 53).

The final micropolitical strategy that addressed teachers' perceptions of their 'decision-making space' (Smith 1983) to undertake reform work involved 'reframing' some of the negative talk about work intensification that was common in most schools. For example, the principal and deputy principal at Seaton High quite explicitly acknowledged that teaching was a demanding and stressful occupation; but it was how that stress and pressure was 'framed' that was important. They repeatedly challenged negative talk about their school and presented new, more positive views about the students and about teachers' capacity to change arrangements at the school. In doing so, they helped reframe how teachers and students 'explained' and made sense of their school and workplace. As Gleeson writes,

the intensification of work performance requires senior managers to manage the meaning of work for staff so that it is appropriately internalized. In the wider organizational literature, the management of such meaning in the workplace is identified as a major management priority and responsibility for increased work performance. (Gleeson 2001: 184)

While the principal and deputy did not articulate their reframing strategy in these utilitarian terms, they nevertheless undertook this significant work because they were well aware of the pervasive relationship between teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and their commitment to the school's reform agenda.

### **Using 'evidence': the importance of local research**

In Australia, there is a long tradition of action research in schools (McTaggart 1997; Grundy 1995). Indeed, there is an international trend towards schools using 'an action research orientation to their professional practice' as expectations of 'evidence-based' decision making in schools increase (Southworth 1999: 60). It is not surprising, then, that the School-Based Research and Reform Project specifically required schools to commit to action research as a means of informing and facilitating their nominated workplace reform or innovation.

Several strategies were implemented to promote schools' action research. Firstly, specific sessions were provided at 'roundtables' on the 'plan-act and observe-reflect' cycle of action research, and on methods of data collection and data analysis. Opportunities were provided for participants to plan and use a variety of strategies related to these processes. Secondly, a key agenda item at 'roundtables' was changed from 'progress reports' to 'action research updates', with the expectation that

participants identify the progress of their school's research in relation to the action research cycle.

Discussions also took place about the strategic use of particular kinds of data to drive local reforms. These were not so much technical discussions about how to construct questionnaires or how to use statistical software to analyse results. They were more about how to use data to demonstrate the need for reforms by using 'evidence-based' arguments. At Seaton, for example, staff, students and parents were all surveyed about their views on different forms of student assessment and reporting. The Year 8 Coordinator made the point that they used data in very strategic ways:

we did it [surveyed] with the Year 8s and we made a point of talking it up at staff meetings with the rest of the staff. I remember presenting feedback, I had student comments, parent comments, staff comments and showed everyone and really took those up. (Coordinator, Seaton High School)

She then wrote a 'position paper' that selectively used some of this data to mount a case for 'wanted' reform.

At Eastern Fleurieu, the leadership team commissioned different types of studies to identify students' views on transition issues. They also drew on external review data collected as part of a quality assurance audit of their school. In the end, they declared,

We had lots of data. We had the surveys that Bob had done with the kids. We had one of our middle schooling people who actually got the kids to write an essay about looking back to what it was like coming from Year 6 to Year 7, so we had that information. Then we had information from the review about the middle years and transition and then we had the information that just came from a brainstorm by a group of interested people on staff.

One of the first things we did to get the Years 5 to 9 group going was to have an extended meeting when we brought all the Years 5 to 9 teachers together to look at all this data. (Assistant Principal, Eastern Fleurieu R-12 School)

Later in the interview the leadership team quite explicitly named their 'evidence-based' approach as a deliberate change strategy. In response to a question about using

a 'logical' approach to generate support for changes in school structures, one of the assistant principals replied:

It could have been, yeah. We did have a very rational approach to change in that we collected data, and then presented that to people and said 'well here it is; well this is what the kids and the parents are saying'.

The strategic use of locally generated research evidence was an effective micropolitical manoeuvre that appealed to teacher rationality and professionalism, mobilised parental support, and garnered the approval of external authorities for major reform at the schools. Interestingly, it also had the effect of silencing and marginalising those staff members who claimed to 'know' what students and parents wanted but who lacked the 'evidence', beyond personal knowledge, to back those claims.

### **Negotiating operational details**

The leadership teams in most schools actively negotiated the shorter-term, more practical details of the proposed reforms. They mostly rejected strategic planning approaches to goal setting, preferring instead to follow non-linear, evolutionary and developmental pathways that were negotiated closely with participants. Promoting what one participant called 'strategic stumbling' was a micropolitical strategy (with many associated tactics) employed to ensure the strong involvement of teachers in determining the course of the research and reform projects. It also reflects a view of teachers as 'agents of initiative' who are seen to possess the knowledge, skills and commitment needed to develop ways to realise the moral purposes promoted in relatively abstract and general forms by the leadership teams.

How did they do this in practice? Incentives and lubricants!

We spent a lot of time eating and drinking and socialising together, but having professional discussions. We give them food and wine and that makes them compliant [laughs]. Seriously though, we firmly believe in it. It's part of valuing people who put in their time. The least we can do is feed them, make them feel comfortable and make it a bit enjoyable. It's taking care of their needs. It's a respect thing.  
(Assistant Principal, Eastern Fleurieu R-12 School)

In perhaps a peculiarly South Australian way (given the state's standing as the main source of premium wines in Australia and increasingly in the UK), good wine and food

were used as both sustenance during after-school meetings that spanned meal times, and ‘treats’ that symbolised the importance and recognition of teachers’ contribution to the detailed planning and implementation of the local school reforms. This feature of school cultures could be trivialised were it not for its pervasive influence on many reform-oriented activities. It seems that by focusing on ‘enjoyment’, ‘fun’, ‘socialising’ and ‘talking’, essential social and emotional supports were established among groups of teachers that made the work of deciding the detail of each reform initiative satisfying and fulfilling. The lesson to be learnt here is that teachers’ participation and involvement in local school reform initiatives can be promoted in the most simple, socially oriented ways through the generous and hospitable use of some of the pleasures of life: good food and wine!

### **Dealing with resistance**

Thus far, the discussion of micropolitical activity within the project schools has focused on what Blase and Blase (1997) call the ‘politics of cooperation’. Quite clearly, most of the work of the leadership teams in the schools was directed towards winning the support and participation of their teachers to advance their broadly conceived ideas for reform. However, all leadership teams talked at length about what forms of resistance they encountered, what they thought caused it, and what strategies and tactics they used to deal with it.

Before embarking on a discussion of these issues, it is important to note that none of the teams spoke disrespectfully about those members of staff they identified as ‘resisters’. Typical comments were ‘I can understand where they are coming from’ (Assistant Principal, Eastern Fleurieu School), ‘change is always hard’ (Principal, Mansfield Park Primary) and ‘I don’t blame them for being a bit reluctant to come on board’ (Coordinator, Seaton High). These views are consistent with their stated commitment to work *with* teachers to make their schools ‘better for the kids’. They refer to giving teachers multiple opportunities to ‘make choices’ and ‘work things through’ (Assistant Principal, Eastern Fleurieu School) in collaboration with other teachers. In Blase and Blase’s terms, they

appear to embrace the challenges of growing and changing; for example, teachers’ resistance to change (Rusch, 1993) and the difficulty of altering roles and behaviors to effect change (Schmuck & Runkel, 1994). These principals believe, as Fullan and Miles (1992) have stated, that change is a journey of learning and risk taking. They demonstrate fundamental respect for the knowledge and abilities of

teachers, conceiving of ‘teacher as intellectual rather than teacher as technician’ (Little, 1993, p. 129). (Blase and Blase 1999: 376)

As a consequence, the leadership teams exhibited considerable patience and persistence in offering teachers ongoing opportunities to learn and develop new skills and join their school’s improvement ‘journey’ (Jackson 2000).

Despite this commitment, the leadership teams still had to deal with some teachers who did not fully embrace the reform agendas of their schools. The most common forms of resistance were passive and non-confrontational. For example, some teachers at Mansfield Park quietly declined to participate in certain staff workshop activities they deemed to be ‘too personal’ or ‘too threatening’, even though they related to building better relationships with the students. An assistant principal at Eastern Fleurieu said that she noticed several teachers ‘creeping off’ from after-school workshops before they were finished. Others failed to return to sessions after short breaks. Others dutifully fulfilled their attendance requirements but contributed little to discussions or activities; some dozed or knitted to avoid full participation. These staff members passively ‘went along with’ whatever was presented or proposed but invariably returned to their classrooms unaffected by the experience.

Leadership team members reported that these teachers caused them considerable frustration because ‘nothing we do seems to move them from their quietly entrenched positions’ (Principal, Mansfield Park Primary School). They rarely complained or publicly challenged the reform agenda; they simply refused to contribute or participate in ways expected of them by the sponsors of the reform initiative.

Other ‘resisters’ were more assertive in their opposition. They publicly spoke against some aspects of the reforms, invoking common arguments like ‘we have done this before’, ‘it isn’t classroom-based or practical’ or ‘the kids and parents don’t want this’ (reported by the Mansfield Park leadership team). In other schools, teachers sought support for their position by talking to parents and other colleagues (‘grizzling’, according to an assistant principal at Eastern Fleurieu). Small coalitions of dissent and resistance formed to overtly challenge the legitimacy of the proposed reforms and to subvert the progress of the change process (reported by the Eastern Fleurieu team).

In two of the secondary schools, the leadership teams identified subject and year level groups of opponents who defended the integrity of their subject disciplines and their status as senior secondary curriculum experts against calls for restructuring (Eastern Fleurieu) and changes in assessment practices (Seaton). Other teams reported

differently organised groups loosely based on age, gender and, in one case, smoking affiliations.<sup>2</sup>

While the responses of leadership teams varied, all explicitly acknowledged the existence of pockets of resistance and spent considerable time planning strategies to deal with them. They understood the micropolitical realities of challenging the status quo and proposing reforms. This positioned them well to act pre-emptively to minimise opposition.

For example, the leadership team at Eastern Fleurieu deliberately structured the membership of staff groups during workshops to reduce opportunities for some staff to ‘knock’ ideas for change.

A: But sometimes being strategic like when we organised group activities, being strategic about who we put together, you know. Just a bit political. We were able to have people in the group who could redirect and not just have those loud knockers pull it down.

B: Yes, we actually orchestrated the group so that we had them in cross-sectional groups because I guess it’s fair to say that most resistance comes from a small group of senior secondary teachers. We actually spread them out so that they would hear other people’s ideas and be involved. That way they didn’t get into a little group of their own. (Assistant Principals, Eastern Fleurieu R–12 School)

They also targeted particular staff to participate in highly desirable training and development activities outside of the school. For example,

we arranged this trip to Victoria to go and visit various schools of excellence over there, both primary and secondary. It was basically a four-day trip away and there were a couple of members of that group who we targeted because they were, well, not quite dinosaurs, but they had been resistant about various things and this was one way to demonstrate that the school was prepared to put in resources to support teachers. (Assistant Principal, Eastern Fleurieu R–12 School)

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2 Smoking is prohibited in South Australian government schools, and if teachers wish to smoke they have to leave the school grounds. In some schools, the ‘smokers’ congregate outside entrances to the school and ‘talk’.

In rare cases, members of the leadership teams publicly confronted passive dissenters. At Mansfield Park, for example, the deputy principal asked two teachers why they were not participating in a workshop activity. In what was a tense exchange, she said that an earlier staff decision had sanctioned the workshop and that participation was 'expected'. The two teachers rejoined the group but failed to participate fully.

A similar confrontation occurred at Eastern Fleurieu when one of the leadership team spoke against a proposal to reschedule and relocate a meeting with students because it inconvenienced several teachers. She reinforced the principle that the school existed to 'serve the needs of students, not teachers'.

Q: And what was the reaction of that staff member?

A: Anger.

Q: And how did the group handle that anger?

A: Mostly with stunned silence. It was very early in the year, there were a lot of new teachers there and I think it was in the second year of operation so it sort of stunned a lot of people. For some others of us it finally voiced something that we thought had been there but had never been said before. (Assistant Principal, Eastern Fleurieu R-12 School)

These isolated incidents demonstrate that in rare cases leaders were prepared to challenge dissenters publicly, particularly if core values were being challenged or overturned. Yet, for their part, few teachers appeared to be 'brave or silly' enough to openly challenge basic aspects of the reform work in the very public forum of a staff meeting. It appears that direct confrontation was a rarely used micropolitical strategy because it overly threatened the general harmony of the staff groups.

Finally, several leadership groups articulated the 'bottom line' when dealing with prolonged dissent. As one assistant principal said,

We have really listened to their issues and tried to address those issues but quite honestly after 4 years of that we're at a stage now where we say, well they're such a small minority that really they have got a significant problem and the easiest solution for them is to seek a transfer to another school. We would support them all the way in that. I think there have probably been 3 or 4 resistors to the whole concept of an R-12 school out of 78 staff. (Assistant Principal, Eastern Fleurieu R-12 School)



In summary, dissent and resistance were expected and consciously addressed by all leadership teams. Within a positive framework that gave teachers ongoing opportunities to participate in the ‘school improvement journey’, some overt micropolitical strategies were employed in several schools to reduce levels of opposition to proposed reforms. They were mostly benign and gentle attempts to sway a small minority of teachers who refused, in largely passive ways, to embrace aspects of the reform agenda.

## **CONCLUSION**

The calls for schools to reform both their structures and more fundamental cultural norms have been overwhelming since the mid 1980s, principally in the interests of promoting increased national economic competitiveness in the face of widening globalisation. Internationally, central governments have used a variety of policy and fiscal directives to drive curriculum reform, restructure outdated and unresponsive organisational practices, and rejuvenate an aging and seemingly moribund teaching profession. In Australia, as in much of the minority world, bureaucratic managerialism has been used to construct a seemingly irresistible top-down juggernaut of reform that largely excludes the possibility, or desirability, of local agency. However, as this paper demonstrates, schools can counter the excesses of managerialism and reassert their capacities to improve themselves. Given meagre levels of extra funding and organisational support, plus the imprimatur to pursue local solutions to local problems, school leaders can ‘make a difference’. In the School-Based Research and Reform Project, school leadership teams conceived, negotiated and implemented reforms through concerted micropolitical activity that was largely consensual, morally motivated, and respectful of teachers’ professionalism. These actions contrast starkly with the dominant practices of managerialism and provide alternative school reform technologies that harness local initiative and agency.

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