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Decentralisation, managerialism and accountability: professional loss in an Australian education bureaucracy

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Educational reforms have largely been analysed from the perspective of the effects on students, teachers and schools, their practices and performance. While there is also a large body of literature that draws on the rhetoric and discourses found in policy documents, there has been little attention given to the organisations in which the educational reforms are born. Following on from previous debates on the neo-liberalisation of education, this study provides an ethnographic examination of an educational administration attempting to decentralise services to schools. This study focuses on the people inside an Australian state education administration during the time when the organisation was being restructured. It examines how decentralisation, managerialism and accountability result in the loss of professional expertise. This study contributes to the literature on the neo-liberalisation of educational institutions by adding the perspective of the people populating the systems charged with managing educational reforms. It demonstrates how decentralisation of services resulted in a shift in the forms of managing and controlling and resulted in a loss of both professional support to schools and expertise from the organisation.

Keywords: decentralisation; managerialism; accountability; ethnography; bureaucracy

Introduction

The burgeoning literature on public sector administration over the last three decades attests to significant shifts in the role of bureaucratic organisations. These shifts are variously described as a shift from big government to little government (Ball 2006; Lingard, Hayes, and Mills 2002), a move from rowing to steering at a distance (Osborne and Gaebler 1993), or a shift from government to governance (Miller and Rose 2008; Ozga 2009). Such shifts have resulted in an increased focus on managing that, coupled with strengthening control through data and information systems, makes the individual accountable and responsible. At the same time decentralisation, or outsourcing of services, has often resulted in the strengthening of central control and regulation (Blackmore 2004; Hoggett 2005; Karlsen 2000). These are strategies that are increasingly evident in education. Ball (2006, 2008) and others have commented upon how the strategies have resulted in changing the status of teachers, the loss of professionalism and an increase in accountability measures.

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Educational reforms have largely been analysed from the perspective of the effects on students, teachers and schools, their practices and performance. Similarly, while there is a large body of literature that also draws on the rhetoric and discourses found in policy documents, little is known about the practices of the administrative bureaucratic organisations and the working lives of the people who populate them (Berg 2006; Horton 2006). Following on from previous debates on neoliberalism in education (see Blum and Ullman 2012; Davies and Bansel 2007), this study provides an examination of an educational administration while attempting to decentralise services to schools.

Drawing on data from an ethnographic study to focus on the people working in an Australian state education administration during an organisational restructure, this study contributes to the literature on the neo-liberalisation of education by adding the perspective of the bureaucrats charged with managing educational reforms. This bureaucratic organisation was responsible for formulating state policy documents, monitoring and ensuring their implementation in state schools through a range of performance technologies as well as the provision of professional development (PD) programs to schools. By describing and analysing the effects of the restructure on the work practices of the people in an education administration, this study provides insights firstly into how people in bureaucratic administrative roles understand, shape and legitimise discourses that often *appear* to be created within these organisations. Secondly, it demonstrates the very real tensions that exist within these organisations, which are not the seats of power but are sites where ideology and educational values are contested. Thirdly, it demonstrates that decentralisation of services results in a loss of professional expertise. Combined these responses attest to a shift from an administrative role that incorporates professional values and beliefs to a managerial role with a different set of identity and values.

In the following sections, I briefly discuss literature that describes the shift from government to governance that results in a shift towards managerialism and that has dominated the discourses about effective administration and strategies to measure performance and accountability. Next, I describe how decentralisation strategies are used to recentralise control and how autonomy and empowerment of schools has become an empty rhetoric. As Australian state education bureaucracies are traditionally centralised organisations separate from the Federal government with constitutional responsibility for education, this case represents a particular strategy for providing support to education. The background for the case study is presented in the next section, and the methodology is then outlined briefly. For this study, the focus is on how different people at different levels of the administrative organisation navigate, respond to and survive major change to their work and work structures when the organisation is restructured. The data are presented through narratives at three levels of the organisation each with their own perspective on the goals of the organisation.

From government to governance

Towards the end of the 1980s, public sector administrations underwent a significant transformation. An increasing distrust of bureaucratic administration and administrators, sometimes referred to as the 'cold monsters' of the state (Hoggett 2005) that were blamed for the 'production of indifference' (Herzfeld 1993), resulted in a shift to create effective organs of a responsible accountable government (du Gay 2005).

The shift, resonating with the private sector, validated neutral and rational managerial forms that proposed to be more efficient and transparent than the traditional forms of bureaucracy. By strengthening managerial practices, these shifts transformed the work of these institutions from government to governance (Miller and Rose 2008). In a study of government administration in Canberra, Pusey (1991, 154) argues that 'those who drive this process of rationalisation believe in it and deploy it very powerfully as an evaluative framework that throws a difficult onus of justification on anyone who seeks to oppose them'. What is then created are 'new managerial subjects with rather different sets of loyalties and identities from professionals and bureaucrats' establishing sets of values that can be defined and measured (Clarke and Newman 1997, 94). As organisational identity becomes the major focus, the 'old' forms of loyalty and the people who are committed to these have to be replaced or have to change. These comments resonate with Lipsky's (1980) conclusion that differences of interests, and also of perspectives exist in bureaucratic organisations and that the lower level officers, while having claims to professional status, are also bound by a bureaucratic status that requires compliance. Therefore, there are different perspectives at different levels of the organisation. Goals are not shared. Lipsky (1980) advocates maintaining professionals in bureaucracy, as professionals are committed to solving service dilemmas. He warns that the removal of professionals could be potentially damaging and lead to an increase in the gap between ideals of theory and realities of practice. In an analysis of a UK Higher Education faculty, Shore and Wright (2000) note the intimate connection between an 'audit culture' and new forms of managerialism. The very organisations that are shaping education in particular ways, I will argue, have themselves become mirrors of what they seek to enforce, and the identities of the people working in them are consequently shaped and reshaped. These warnings, including those by Lipsky (1980) and Clarke and Newman (1997) regarding a shift in role from an administrative role with professional support provision to a managerial role where control and assessment of performance, are clearly illustrated in the findings of this study.

There is wide acknowledgement that people in public service administration face a dilemma between serving the state and serving the client (Lea 2008; Lipsky 1980; Mosse 2005; Pusey 1991). Over the past decade, Gjelstrup and Sørensen (2007) note that while shifts have changed the structure and framework of these organisations, the dilemmas remain. Attempts to rationalise and make public sector administration more effective have resulted in new forms of managerialism that are also found in educational bureaucracies. For educational administrators, the tension may lie in enforcing homogenous performance strategies on the one hand and in the recognition of the needs of schools, teachers and students in all their heterogeneity on the other.

In his study of the rise of new education bureaucracies in the UK, Walsh (2006, 96) critiques what he calls the 'performance management culture' based on transparency, openness and accessibility for diminishing the scope of what can be achieved by schools and favouring a narrow definition of performance strategies instead. These strategies are linked to what Strathearn (2000) calls the audit culture, an externally defined control of performance that brings with it a covert implication of mistrust of professionals. Walsh (2006) refers to the progressive school-based change brought about by provision of support from professionals and following grass-roots movements internally in schools that was subordinated in preference for large scale externally defined reform rooted in competition and performance criteria and linked

to external surveillance and accountability. As educational administration follows public sector shifts towards increased accountability and control the education bureaucracies have had to learn to manage in new ways. According to Ozga (2009), they have responded by introducing a complicated set of data and information systems that monitor and control. The performance measures, and the values that underlie the techniques of accountability, are legitimised by a rationale that many scholars question (Grek et al. 2009; Ozga 2009). The pervasive nature of these reforms affects the institutions themselves and the roles and identity of the people who populate them. Alongside the increase in performance measures is another strategy that has been frequently adopted in the new bureaucracies which is the decentralisation of services previously provided by the administrative organisations. This is the theme of the next section.

Managing decentralisation

Decentralisation is closely linked to accountability frameworks controlled by the central bureaucratic organisations and has become a familiar strategy used to shift responsibility to the local in a rhetoric of autonomy and empowerment (Blackmore 2004). In education, decentralisation has been heralded as the strategy for empowering and making schools autonomous. Blackmore (2004) describes the considerable structural reforms in education in the 1990s that flowed out of neoliberal ideologies that were bound to individualism, marketisation, decentralisation, choice and privatisation and which led to new modes of governmentality. She traces the emergence of a particular discourse that, combined with specific strategies, re-shaped the identities of teachers, parents and students and created a structure for ‘downloading responsibility (and therefore blame) for outcomes to schools’ (Blackmore 2004, 273). Decentralisation is therefore closely tied to performance frameworks at the local level and as such requires an increase in control and monitoring by managers in the central administrative organisations.

In his study of decentralisation of schools in Norway and Canada, Karlsen (2000) asserts that although some decentralisation reforms do come from the grass-roots level, the majority of decentralising reforms emerge from strategies of central government. Karlsen (2000) argues that the result is a re-consolidation of central power. His research demonstrates that, in real terms, there was no shift of power to local level and that all that was being transferred were the conflicts and problems. Karlsen (2000) further argues that the legitimising effect of moving responsibility to the local level resulted in re-establishing central authority. The management objectives, which are described, were goal and outcome orientated rather than process orientated. Karlsen (2000) concludes that the concept of decentralisation is hard to pin down but always involves power of some kind and includes a movement of tasks from central to local bodies. It is important, he warns, to note that a mere delegation of tasks does not result in a shift of power. Instead, what is achieved is ‘decentralized centralism’ (Karlsen 2000, 535). Karlsen (2000) demonstrates that decentralisation strategies have led to a recentralisation and a strengthening of control from the centre. What is demonstrated by Karlsen’s (2000) study is the effect on schools, teachers and students, but what is not visible is the effect on the organisations that administer these changes, on the people who work in them, their roles and their identities. Spurred by a curiosity about who these people are and what they understood as their role in the organisation, I approached the state administrative

organisation to carry out an ethnography of their daily practices. The following section outlines the background for this study.

Background for the case study

Australia is divided into six states and two territories. There are three levels of government: the Federal, the states and territories, and the local. Diversity is a familiar concept in Australia. The vast distances would stagger many Europeans further complicated by densely populated diverse city areas on one hand and equally diverse fragmented rural populations on the other. Out with the urban communities, the rural communities range from rich well-resourced mining areas at one end of the scale and widespread sparsely populated areas of non-English-speaking Aboriginal communities at the other. The problems presented by the demographics of the vast continent have resulted in Australia creating some of the most centralised bureaucratic systems in the world (Lingard, Hayes, and Mills 2002). The challenges of providing equal resources to such diverse populations resulted in the creation of strongly centralised organisations. These organisations have traditionally provided resources through the administration and delivery of centralised PD initiatives.

The case study was carried out inside an Australian state educational bureaucracy responsible for administration of state schools. The organisation administered and managed resources in the form of funding and educational services and resources to over 700 schools and was responsible for the appointment of over 20,000 teachers. The organisation in this study, similar to other Australian states, is constitutionally responsible for education and is historically and traditionally founded in a centralised provision of resources to schools (Lingard, Hayes, and Mills 2002). In this organisation, the centralised initiatives were, for example, literacy and numeracy PD programmes that were focused on improving student achievement in schools where student achievement was an issue. These programmes were not only managed by the organisation but also developed and delivered by the educational administrators in the organisation. Schools with large numbers of low-achieving students were allocated funding by the organisation that allowed them to participate in the PD programmes. The staff in the organisation administered and delivered workshops to teachers whose schools had received funding. More will be said later about the development of these programmes. The organisation provided resources to schools through a whole range of centralised initiatives to improve performance of low-achieving students. Consistent with the broad thrust of strategies that are often associated with neo-liberal reform a document, that stipulated a focus on successful students, excellent teachers and good schools, was released by the organisation just six months prior to my study. The document stipulated a decentralisation of the services provided by the organisation. Funding was no longer to be linked to programmes but instead directly allocated to the schools empowering them and allowing them to become autonomous and responsible for the resources they sought (Robinson 2011). In order to carry out the decentralisation the organisation was to undergo a restructure that would result in the withdrawal of these programmes. The focus in this study was on the withdrawal of the numeracy programme from the perspective of three levels of the organisation; (i) the team that delivered the numeracy programme to schools, (ii) the Senior Managers and (iii) the CEO of the organisation, who had ultimate responsibility for the restructure.

Methods

As the focus in this study was on the people who work in an Australian State education bureaucracy the organisation will be described in general terms to protect its identity. In addition the people who are described here are given pseudonyms and their titles are changed in an attempt to protect their personal identities. It is also an important point that, similar to other Australian education bureaucracies, all the people in the organisation were former teachers or had professional background in education. Over a ten month period in the field ethnographic methods were used including over 1000 h of participant observation combined with semi-structured interviews in formal as well as informal settings. It was the CEO Adam's enthusiasm for an ethnographic study that eased my entry into the organisation. He hoped that my prolonged research inside the organisation might provide an opportunity for people working in the organisation to reflect on their own practices, either because they were being observed or because they would be actively engaged in dialogues with an outsider. I had access to people at all levels of the organisation within the department responsible for Curriculum Support, from Adam who had direct contact to the Director of the organisation, down to the Curriculum officers at the bottom who had daily contact with teachers and principals throughout the State. In total 42 people from Curriculum Support consented to participate in my study.

My daily presence in the organisation meant that I had time (Jeffrey and Troman 2004) to build relationships and establish contacts with a range of informants throughout the organisation. I was invited to informal meetings in coffee shops, to discussions in offices and formal meetings with a range of participants. When I had no appointments in my calendar I sought out the contacts I had made to purposefully build up a picture of their work. I sought to maintain regular contact with Adam and suggested that he invite me to attend the meetings with the Senior Managers with responsibility for the seven departments. At this level, I met with Graham the Senior Manager of the one of the departments on a daily basis and it was to his department that I had access. Some informants updated me on a regular basis on the latest developments within their area some simply wanted to discuss the coming restructure.

When I began my research, I was allocated a desk in the open office area of the Graham's section. From here, I was able to observe the interactions of the teams of people each with responsibility for different subject areas and for assessment and monitoring tool development. The people sitting closest to me were members of the numeracy team. My physical proximity meant that I quickly established close contact with four mathematical experts from the numeracy team and became involved in their interactions with others. This close contact allowed me to gain a deep understanding of their work. The majority of their time was spent outside the 'office' either delivering PD workshops in numeracy to teachers or visiting the schools where the teachers taught. I was included in their meetings in the organisation and also invited to join them at the workshops they delivered to teachers and on occasion included in their visits to schools.

In the following sections, I describe the numeracy programme and introduce the numeracy team. Then, I introduce their manager Graham and finally the CEO Adam who each present different perspectives on the work of the organisation. They give their responses to the withdrawal of the programme. I have chosen these three sections of the organisation in order to illustrate the different perspectives on the

organisation and how the restructure was understood differently at each level and affected each in different ways.

Leading change through centralised initiatives

At the end of the 1990s a curriculum reform similar to the Key Stages in the UK was introduced by the organisation. To support the curriculum reform literacy and numeracy PD programmes were developed to help teachers in their new teaching practices. The literacy and numeracy PD programmes had been developed by two independent teams in the organisation. The numeracy team, all maths teachers, used their experiences of working in classrooms and worked alongside a research team from the local university to analyse how mathematical concepts were understood by children. A numeracy text book was published and then a PD programme was created in which classroom teachers were trained to become numeracy specialists. The organisation used the data from its own literacy and numeracy tests combined with the socio-economic index to determine which schools were most in need of literacy and numeracy resources. Under-achieving schools were then allocated funding that allowed a classroom teacher to become a literacy or numeracy specialist.

The PD programme consisted of eight workshops that were delivered by the numeracy team over a two year period. Between each workshop one of the team visited the teachers in their schools. The goal was to improve teachers' understanding of how children acquire numeracy strategies. Coupled with this explicit teaching practices were developed designed to motivate, develop understanding in numeracy. Secondly and equally as important the teachers were trained to become leaders of numeracy in their own schools. They were expected to work shoulder to shoulder with other teachers, to work collaboratively to plan lessons, and to work with the school principal on whole school planning of numeracy improvement with particular focus on the classes where the low-achieving students and the teachers who most needed guidance. The numeracy programme had been administered and delivered by the organisation for over seven years at the time of this case study. In total, over 700 teachers had been trained as literacy or numeracy specialists. Both these programmes were withdrawn during the restructure as part of a strategy to give schools more autonomy.

The numeracy team before the restructure

Sitting at my desk in the area occupied by the numeracy team, I was quickly drawn into the work of the numeracy team. The numeracy team consisted of four women Lisa, Laura, Rachel and Deborah. Deborah had been temporarily assigned as line manager during the restructure period. Like Deborah, Lisa and Laura had been involved in the initial development of the programme. Lisa, Rachel and Deborah worked with Primary School teachers, and Laura, a former secondary Maths teacher, trained Secondary teachers. Deborah had been involved with the programme as a manager and had strong contacts to schools. She was recognised by the organisation for her work in the outlying rural areas where new graduates were appointed to schools that had problems maintaining a stable population of students. The team were passionate about the programme and were keen for me to understand the strengths of the programme. Over the seven years the programme had run, the team had continually adjusted the programme to fit the needs of individual schools and

teachers. Building trusting relationships and gaining respect were key elements of their programme. Their work was innovative and creative. As a team, they reflected and responded autonomously to the needs of teachers and students in their discussions together. They discussed the diversity of the leadership, staff and students in the individual schools. But, according to Lisa, no matter how good a programme is, it cannot combat inequity of resources alone. Lisa explained 'you may have a fancy Ferrari, but it is not going to perform optimally on our red sand covered outback roads!' As time went on, I realised that the programme they delivered was not 'just another government intervention', but was based on research evidence from classroom practices. Rachel explained that its strength lay in being 'a central initiative, well researched, well-constructed' and that 'everybody got the same message'. But these strengths were combined with having a team of experts whose understanding came from years of PD. According to Lisa, the team was a 'powerful team of people who were able to produce change in a fairly major way'. Each member of the team talked about the importance of maintaining an ongoing relationship with schools and understanding diversity. Deborah was explicit about how to lead change, by being sensitive to the abilities of the teachers and their principals and by providing professional support and guidance. Although the team represented the 'bureaucracy', they did not regard themselves as 'bureaucrats', bureaucrats were, according to Lisa, people who 'administered and managed'. This was not their work. They had daily contact with teachers and schools and drew on a wealth of professional expertise and knowledge to develop curriculum and pedagogical practices. According to Lisa, they wanted to 'make a difference' both to teachers' work and student achievement.

Lisa talked about the team being 'agents of change', a phrase that for her encompassed the ethos of the professional character of their work. However, their vision for what the programme could achieve was not shared by everyone in the organisation. It seemed that the more removed from the practices of schools, the less was understood about how the programme was structured and what it set out to achieve. Nonetheless, the restructure of the organisation dictated that this programme along with others was to be withdrawn. Instead schools were to be allocated funding and allowed to become autonomous and empowered to make their own choices about what resources were needed. Let me leave the numeracy team for a moment and turn my gaze upward to Graham, their Senior Manager.

A managerial perspective

In my daily contact throughout the restructure period with Graham, the Senior Manager for a Curriculum Support department, he repeatedly talked about 'retaining expertise within the organisation'. Graham had worked in state education for a number of years and had left to work outside the state recently returning to take up the post he now occupied. He had a broad knowledge of other education systems and read widely and had adopted a management style that the numeracy team criticised as 'too laissez-faire'. Throughout the period of the research, he complained that the other Senior Managers and Adam often misunderstood his intentions. Some of his ideas had been successfully transformed into practice. He had established assessment teams that were working with moderation. However, although Graham had daily contact with his teams, he lacked a deep understanding about the way in which the programmes actually worked to change teachers' practices.

Leadership before the restructure

At the top of the organisation and responsible for the restructure was Adam, my initial contact. He had worked in the organisation for over 20 years and was not averse to calling himself a bureaucrat. He commented

I don't believe being a 'good' bureaucrat makes me, sort of lacking in humanity, or lacking in concern for kids education, and to pursue, you know, what I believe is important for kids. (Adam, CEO)

During our conversations, Adam acknowledged that he was removed from the practices of schools and that his knowledge of school performance and student achievement was informed by the data collecting systems managed by the organisation and from anecdotes gleaned from other sources. He discussed his concern about the criticism of the organisation that was almost a weekly occurrence in the press. Adam felt that the organisation was too often the target for blame. The state had one newspaper that often placed blame for the underachievement in schools with an inadequate system, using comparisons between the performance of the independent and private schools and the state schools as evidence. A new Director had recently been appointed to the organisation and one of the first tasks he had been given was to formulate a document that, in Adam's words, provided a 'clear rationale for the organisation' to support schools. Since its initial formulation by Adam, the document had been through many hands and the result was a long way from his initial draft. He talked about what he would have liked to achieve in the restructure but told me his vision had been compromised to a certain extent by what he called 'the political ideology'. The situation was further complicated by the appointment of a new education minister, followed by a series of cuts across all public sector organisations a few weeks later, and then a requirement by the Federal government to develop a national curriculum that was underpinned by the introduction of a national test. These events complicated the restructure.

Restructuring educational administration

The document stipulated a focus on the classroom, and he was in agreement that effective classroom teachers were the key to ensuring the success of every student. In line with the rhetoric of the document, he felt that schools needed to have a more central role in their own decision-making. According to Adam, the organisation had 'taken care of the operational side for too long'. Carefully wording his responses to me, Adam articulated that he wanted a shift in responsibility and felt that could be achieved by providing the schools with autonomy which meant another restructure for the organisation. The restructure of the organisation, he emphasised, was not just rhetoric but had to become practice, and the organisation had 'to reflect, in practice, the shift that the document promised'. The shift would be achieved by decentralising direct delivery of services by the organisation, making schools autonomous creating, according to Adam, 'the space for the growth of excellence'. He explained that the volume of programmes and projects and government interventions had increased over the last four years. Working out who did what, where, when and why was taxing, even, he admitted, for the people working in the organisation, so withdrawing the programmes was, as he explained, 'simply a rational means to an end'.

The numeracy team, like the others delivering programmes, now sat at their desks on a daily basis focusing on strategies, frameworks and legislation to simplify

and make access to the organisation easier for schools. Deadlines were to be met for the online resource material, and the team found that their contact with schools was restricted to telephone conversations and e-mail.

Surviving the restructure – from agents of change to dead bodies

I was surprised by the passivity of the numeracy team during the restructure process. Deborah told me that, although they ‘knew the programme would change’, they did not know what form it would take. I accompanied them when they approached their new line manager and they were told that the programme was ‘winding down’ and vague statements were made about doing ‘less work in schools’. They talked to me about their confusion over what message they could give to schools about the extent of provision of numeracy support in the future. The team began to discuss their insecurities and the fact that they felt that they were less effective.

I questioned Lisa about their strategies for survival. Lisa claimed that there were people who were good at ‘corridor policy talk’ and that she was not. When I asked her what she meant, Lisa told me that she was only interested in running the programme and making sure that it worked for schools. She was not interested in promoting herself, either to her managers, or to her Senior Manager and, she implied, there were those who did. Deborah, on the other hand, worked hard to inform the new managers about the importance of the programme and what it was achieving. It was apparent to me that the team were politically out of the loop, and if I understood Lisa correctly, this was by choice. Lisa told me that she could not imagine herself in a job where she was ‘stuck in the office’. Lisa maintained that putting the resource material online did not mean that teaching practices would change as a result. According to Lisa, teachers would continue ‘doing what they did’. Lisa, backed up by the other team members, argued that changing teachers practices required time: time to learn, to reflect, to interpret and to share experience. The role of the organisation, in their opinion, was to have people in positions like theirs to do the interpreting and to facilitate the implementation of new teaching practices. Without that leadership and expertise, the connections between ideology and practice would be lost. This was summed up when Lisa commented on her new tasks and the lack of face-to-face contact with schools.

You know what we are Sarah? We are just dead bodies. I don’t want to be a dead body, but that is what they want, us sit in front of our screens and do the job. (Lisa, Numeracy Team)

Her comment about becoming a dead body stayed with me and was indicative of the inertia I was witnessing. For Lisa, as with the others in the team, becoming a bureaucrat, ‘a dead body’, meant not having the contact with schools to motivate and support change in teaching practices. As the restructure took shape, new positions were formulated from the old ones. People were faced with applying for new positions if they wanted to remain in the organisation. A number chose to leave, and Lisa was one of them, taking up a position at a local university. In other departments, I noticed that people who worked on other programmes faced with applying for a new position reacted in a number of ways; some took long service leave, in the hope that things, as one manager told me, ‘might settle down’ and others applied for jobs outside the organisation, in local universities and colleges, or simply applied for a position in a school. There was an exodus of people at this level of the

organisation. By the time, the restructure was complete; three of the four numeracy team members had left the organisation.

Surviving the restructure – from manager to principal

As the restructure took shape and the new Senior Manager and line managers began to take up their new positions, the work of the organisation gradually changed. The funding previously allocated to the programmes had now been allocated directly to schools, and the programmes were officially withdrawn. Graham worked hard in the restructuring period to retain the expertise of the teams, but became increasingly disillusioned with the direction the organisation was taking. He complained that the organisational goals were about ‘achieving political outcomes as opposed to achieving educational and social justice’. Graham recounted many heated discussions in the senior management team. As the restructure was focused on his department, he was required to apply for a new managerial position. His application was unsuccessful, someone from another department was appointed, and Graham left the organisation feeling ‘over-looked and under-valued’. He eventually took up a position as a principal in one of the city schools. In a final interview, he told me that he was saddened by the ‘loss of good people from the system’ and felt that the organisation was ‘hand-balling responsibility’ to schools. Exiting the organisation however was just one response.

Surviving the restructure – Reshaping identities and compromises

During the period where new appointments were made, I had many conversations with Adam. I understood that he had met on numerous occasions with the new head of the organisation. He hinted that they had not been able to agree how the organisation should support schools. Adam still believed that the decentralisation of services would empower schools and give them more flexibility to make their own decisions about what they needed. Adam was clear about the effects of the restructure. He made this comment,

I don't think restructures achieve very much to be honest. I will be upfront with that. You know structures don't make it work, people make it work. (Adam, CEO)

Adam explained that the organisation had been ‘in a state of almost constant state of restructure’ for many years and needed stability and continuity. When the restructure was complete, Adam was promoted to Deputy Director for the organisation. He then appointed two Senior Executives under him to inform him on the workings of the organisation as he was going to spend more time dealing with the political agenda.

Surviving the restructure – Flying under the radar

Curious about the work of the organisation after the restructure, I returned to the organisation six months after completing my research. Deborah, the only remaining member of the original numeracy team was keen to update me on the situation in the organisation. She explained that after the restructure, she had been appointed as manager for a team that only existed on paper as everyone else had left. The numeracy team was required to provide online curriculum support and to give advice by

e-mail and telephone to schools when it was requested. She explained that a Senior Manager was appointed, and then the line managers. After this, the job descriptions for the teams that would work under them were announced. There was massive uncertainty throughout the curriculum section. No one was sure who would get what position or what the jobs would involve. She reflected on that period in which she said,

There was quite a chunk of time when there was no decision making because no one knew what they had to make decisions about. It was very reactive. I found quite a few people coming and asking me questions because really, when I actually looked at it, I was one of the few who had actually been there for a while. (Deborah, Numeracy Manager)

She explained that when someone was appointed to a new position, there was often no hand over, the previous person having left the organisation, or was busy in a new role. Deborah's new line manager and even the new Senior Manager, who had replaced Graham, sought her out, and she admitted, somewhat coyly, she had taken advantage of the situation. She told me that the Senior Manager had not fully grasped the extent of the tasks never having worked in curriculum support before. Therefore, Deborah found that she was being asked for advice and, feeling confident about her work with the programme and her expertise, was prepared to give it. Deborah had explained to her new Senior Manager that the numeracy programme was a resource that schools still needed. As schools now had funding, they would request support and she suggested that the organisation should provide it. Deborah had explained to her manager that the funding would allow the schools to employ a specialist, but a specialist would need training. This provided an opening that Deborah creatively exploited. She talked about 'flying under the radar' to achieve the ends she desired. Once she had her Senior Manager's support, she had set about hiring and training a new team to deliver workshops to the schools that had the resources to pay for training a specialist.

Discussion

Bureaucratic organisations become embedded with meaning for those who inhabit them, just as the people who inhabit them reflect those identities and meanings (Shore 2000). The different responses to the restructure of the people working in the organisation demonstrate the strength of ethnography in examining the work of organisations. The focus on three levels of the organisation illustrates different perspectives on the changes in the organisation. The hierarchical structure of the organisation ensured a delegation of work from the high, policy-level strategic planning to the low, technical administration and to the professional delivery of services. However, the flow of communication that informed policy upward from practices and from policy intentions downwards to practices seemed to be in tension. The neoliberal discourses found in a 'market mantra' (Blum and Ullman 2012) of choice, and autonomy dominated the new rhetoric of the organisation and was carried out by decentralising services. The programmes that the organisation put in place and supported for a number of years were withdrawn and replaced by funding without the support and expertise that was linked to the programmes. The loss of professional support in the form of these services was questioned by the people who were responsible for those services. Their values were ignored, and their expertise was

lost as many of them left the organisation, dissatisfied with the shift from professional support and administration to one of managing resources. They did not view themselves as managers and ‘bureaucrats’, but instead as the professional link between the bureaucratic organisation and the practices of the classroom. It appears that new forms of managerialism are being created replacing to some extent the professional expert and the relational aspects that existed previously. At the managerial level, there was for some a belief that a strong centralised organisation was the link to improving education and social justice. However, Graham’s managerial style did not match with the shift the organisation was making and he was not re-appointed to the position. He believed that it was the expertise of the people in the organisation that could make a difference to schools.

At the top of the organisation, Adam was clearly in a unique position. With a long career in administration, Adam was able and willing to re-shape his identity to fit the discourses. Miller and Rose (2008) argue that the role of rhetoric is to produce meaning, create intellectual technologies and to shape thinking. A strong organisation had to be populated by ‘good’ people who understood the needs of schools, but those people would draw more on their administrative and managerial skills than on professional qualities linked to experience and expertise in classroom practices. The role of the organisation and the meaning of words such as expertise shifted and became linked to data, figures, statistics, rather than people, who are not rational; expertise in this form can be shaped by the technologies which were linked to political rationalities.

Finally, the anecdote about Deborah adds an interesting perspective to this case study. She was able to creatively interpret the discourses to fit her professional values and beliefs and took advantage of the fragmentation, the inertia and lack of cohesion in the organisation to re-create the numeracy programme and establish a new team. Although the new team lacked the expertise and background that the former team had, they were able, under Deborah’s guidance, to re-establish relationships with schools.

At the top, the concern was with the survival of the organisation as an administrative institution to control and monitor, while at the bottom, the concern was with the quality of services provided to schools and the professional relationships with them. The people in this organisation reacted in different ways to the restructure and the consequences brought about by the shift. Some were willing to negotiate, adopt and adapt and to reshape their identity to fit the discourses. Others were unable to reconcile their strong beliefs and values and chose to leave the organisation. And yet, there was room for some to work creatively to continue to some extent the processes that were in place before the restructure.

Conclusion

What can a case study of the people in an Australian educational administration add to understanding of the pervasion of audit culture? Public sector reforms do not just affect services to those served by the public sector, but also pervade the values and beliefs that are fundamental to the goals of the organisations themselves. This study demonstrates the shift to a set of values that are separate in character from the services previously provided and which did not match with the values of all of those within the organisation (Clarke and Newman 1997). These administrative organisations are less coherent than they appear. The differences of interests and of

perspectives that were previously able to exist at different levels of bureaucratic organisations were expunged by a decentralisation of services in the guise of empowerment and autonomy. There are severe losses and damage done to the professional expertise and relationships that once existed between the schools and the organisation. Decentralisation brought with it a different form of managerialism that included more control and distancing. There seems to be a shift from servicing and support of a client to control, managing and accountability, which changes the relationship between the organisation and the schools. There were clearly different perspectives on the role of the organisation at different levels. Lipsky (1980) warns against the removal of professionals from these organisations suggesting that their removal would lead to an increase in the gap between ideals of theory and realities of practice. Professionals must remain as they are committed to solving service dilemmas. What is clear from this study is that professionals were left with little room for manoeuvre in an organisation that is involved in a high stakes game that sets it up in competition with other states and Federal regimes of control.

The shift from the provision of services that are supported by professional expertise towards a strengthening of managerial practices is neither clear cut nor without tension. The strong links that the organisation had developed through establishing and nurturing relationships with schools, teachers and teaching practices were severed or at least severely damaged by decentralisation of services. For some of the people working in the organisation, it removed them from a supportive role to one which was more about surveillance, control and monitoring.

Notes on contributor

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