Changing and challenging dimensions of principal autonomy in South Australia: A lived experience phenomenological analysis of the courage to care

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Abstract

*This paper employs critical policy historiography of South Australian public education as a contextual backdrop that speaks to a hermeneutic phenomenological study of the lived experiences of two former public-school principals, who describe how their ongoing social justice schooling agendas in public education met with considerable departmental resistance. Both resigned at the peak of their public education careers to pursue their schooling vision in the federally funded independent school system which traditionally catered for the wealthy, elite schools and forms the third tier of the complex funding arrangements of education in Australia that has festered for years under the label "the funding wars" (Ashenden, 2016). Changes to funding arrangements opened up the system and gave the opportunity for our two principals to pursue a public vision in the independent schooling sector, free from what they described as the "shackles" of bureaucratic command and control. The phenomenological essence of their journeyed leadership narratives reveals the **courage to care**, driving their narrative reflections. They perceived that increasing demands of departmental compliance took them away from being able to pursue a socially just vision with autonomy and freedom. Stepping into the uncertainty of their new independent schooling aspirations, the principals **felt** professional relief and **found** real autonomy. We conclude with an exploration of the phenomenological notion of "the courage to care."*

Keywords: *Phenomenology; policy historiography; public education; social justice; leadership; Indigenous education*

Context

This paper explores the lived experience journey of two former public education principals leaving the public education sector to establish new independent schools in South Australia (SA). The Statement on Public Education in South Australia defines the distinguishing characteristics of public education as "quality, equity, diversity, cohesion, collaboration and trust, community, and democracy" (Reid, 2017, p. 5). It is these characteristics that the two former principals left the public education sector to defend. In choosing to leave the public education sector to establish independent schools, the principals responded with care, innovation and courage to meet the needs and concerns of parents and students for an education that engaged their children in democratic and

sustainable forms of education in a way that had been "against the grain" in the public education system.

Locating ourselves and our research question

As teacher educators, and advocates for public education, we have found ourselves wondering whether we are taking for granted some essential understandings of "being" a public-school leader in current times. Our wonderings are a consequence of our own experiences as students, teachers, teacher educators and school leaders witnessing the erosion of the social justice roots of our belief in public education and from the stories we are eliciting from our research with school leaders, teachers and students.

Our research also went into experiential accounts of what it meant to be "in" public school leadership. In Part 2 of this paper, we turn to the experiential accounts of two former public-school leaders to explore how their school leadership life worlds were impacted by standardising policy discourses and departmental compliance decrees. Ethics was gained through Flinders University under the "Growing Ngutu" project with one principal consenting to be identified in the paper and the other wishing to remain anonymous. Both principals are committed to the characteristics of public education, which provoked our key exploratory question: *Can you describe why you chose to leave public education?*

Methodology

Policy historiography

In Part 1, we employ policy historiography (Gale, 2001) cast across four significant policy changes that impacted on principals' work and their professional identities, to better understand the public schooling context in which our two school leaders worked. Given word limitations, the historiographical approach in this article is abridged. Gale (2001) suggests that undertaking policy historiography entails three key questions which we pursued: (1) What were the "public issues" and "private troubles" within a particular policy domain during some previous period and how were they addressed? (2) What are they now; and (3) What is the nature of the change from the first to the second? (p. 385)

Lived experience hermeneutic phenomenology

In Part 2, we use hermeneutic "lived experience" methodology as espoused by van Manen (2016), using data generated through three 90-minute conversational interviews over three months with our two subjects to capture the subtlety of lived human experience of organisational life and relations, opening the ontological dimensions of their decision to leave public education, and examining the circumstances and meaning of their leaving and their planning for a new future. Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the lifeworld or human experience as it is lived. The focus is

toward illuminating details and seemingly taken for granted aspects within experience in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). It is attentive to the philosophies underpinning both hermeneutics and phenomenology (van Manen, 2016), described by Smith (1997) as a "research methodology aimed at producing rich textual descriptions of the experiencing of selected phenomena in the life world of individuals that are able to connect with the experience of all of us collectively" (p. 80). From identification of the experience of phenomena, in this case, the lived experience of being in public school leadership and then leaving public school leadership, a deeper understanding of the meaning of that experience was sought (Smith, 1997) by collectively reading and rereading the narrative interview texts and drawing out key themes of the experiences revealing the phenomenological essence or deepest meaning (Giles et al., 2015). This involved increasingly deeper and layered reflection of our two principal stories. In Part 2, following each sourced interview extract section, a phenomenological paragraph of meaning is provided. Our overarching research question asked participants to explore the central phenomenon concerning their decision to leave the public-school system.

Part 1: A policy historiography of policy change impacting the work of South Australian public school principals

South Australia has a deep history of active participation of teachers and school leaders in the development of policy going back to the 1970s where principals were afforded "the widest liberty to vary courses, to alter the timetable, to decide the organisation of the school and government within the school, to experiment with teaching methods, assessment of student achievement and in extra-curricular activities" (Memorandum to Heads of Departmental Schools, as cited in Kaminsky, 1981, p.198). This became popularly known as the "freedom and authority memo."

Out of this "freedom and authority," a uniquely South Australian curriculum settlement emerged as a "prioritising of social justice; a focus on the individual student and his or her development; and a quest for a commonality of curriculum provision with an alternative to academic subjects as its core foundation" (Collins & Yates, 2009, p.127). The last three decades have seen the "freedom and authority" of principals to shape their schools, inform their district priorities, and be heard in a central office eroded by successive waves of neoliberal educational reform.

1990s: Enter New Public Management (NPM)

The South Australian Department for Education (DfE) embraced the efficiency and effectiveness logics of New Public Management (NPM) in the early 1990s, bringing private business institutional acumen for cost reduction into how education bureaucracies should best function and behave. Welch (1998) indicated that all Australian education departments in the 1990s

"ramped up" an agenda of business and market principles of efficiency and quality control upon schools and, in so doing, began to reposition the principles of social justice and equality towards ones of economics and business management. In South Australia, the freedom and autonomy granted to principals to shape their schools was constrained by the DfE prioritising literacy results over social justice initiatives.

1999: Enter local school management

Principal autonomy was further eroded by South Australia's version of local school management called "Partnerships 21" (P21). Following the introduction of P21, the words "social justice" no longer featured in the DfE bureaucracy policy discourse. Schools had the ability to innovate within their region and tailor their organisation and curriculum to reflect their student cohort only on the proviso that they met the metrics dictated by the DfE for improved literacy and numeracy. Overall freedoms were eroded but principals could still find the gaps to pursue freedom and authority in the name of social justice.

2014: Enter "partnerships"

At this time, schools were organised into "regions" that enabled geographically bounded groups of schools to collaborate on resources and ideas. DfE central office saw the regions as a barrier between the central bureaucracy and the schools, with this concern addressed in new policy which removed the "regions" and asserted direct control over schools through the appointment of Educational Directors (EDs) responsible to enforcing the decrees of the centralised bureaucracy.

2018: Enter McKinsey's "world class public education system"

In 2018, the DfE adopted the aim of becoming a "world class education system," using both the definition of world class (as a single number featuring on a McKinsey designed Universal Scale) defined by McKinsey, and featuring in McKinsey designed road map and compass. (Mourshed et al., 2010; DfE, 2018) The McKinsey Company is one of the many private multi-national consultancy firms that sells its ideas of free market reform across all areas of government, taking hold in Australia at both a federal and state level. In 2007, they turned their attention to high performing school systems. Their first report concluded that good teachers make good systems and so to improve the outcomes of schooling, the system needed to improve the quality of teachers (Barber & Mourshed et al., 2007). Their second report concluded that it was the top-down command of leaders that made systems great and that the success of any system could be determined by a simple algorithm (Mourshed et al. 2010). The McKinsey formula for school improvement is compelling in its simplicity. School improvement is reduced to a single number calculated by McKinsey consultants with a top-down focus on attaining that number driving everything that the DfE and schools do. Local school innovation and autonomy is constrained by the superiority of central office

bureaucratic knowledge, beholden to McKinsey, over the knowledge of leaders and teachers in schools, with system measurement now determining "good" schools from "bad," compliant leaders from non-compliant, and competent teachers from incompetent (Lingard, 2013).

Public education has been systematised

The move away from school autonomy in SA now sees principals grappling with the *fine print* on how to be a "good" *McKinsey Co.* school and a "good" *McKinsey Co.* principal, made so by a policy ensemble that takes teachers and leaders away from the autonomy (Thomson, 2010) to lead the creative intellectual work of planning programs for students. Service to the systemic centre is in; principal and teacher knowledge as an equal to bureaucratic knowledge is out (Bills, 2020; Dolan, 2020a; Reid, 2020).

Part 2: Hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of the principal lived experience narratives

Our two principal "subjects." Andrew and Judy, were principals throughout the latter part of these policy change junctures. Their schools had performed well against DfE metrics, had good "word of mouth" in the community, and attracted positive media attention in the educational and wider community. These schools were feted, illustrated in the two extracts from published articles provided below.

> Ten years ago, with a visionary principal at the helm, Alberton Primary School in South Australia began to reinvent itself. Now celebrated by the OECD and others as an exemplar of a dynamic 21st century learning ethos, it embodies much of the innovation talk about education. It's been grassroots, whole-of-school effort, with staff and students making highly practical interventions to the traditional school routine, the school community, and even the school grounds. (Dusseldorps, 2015: Review Report of Alberton Primary School)

> Nature schools are increasing in Australia and teachers say they're achieving amazing results. In South Australia, "Nature Community School" has steadily grown since it started… in 2014. Principal Judy… said it was the first school of its kind in Australia and has steadily grown as parents looked for alternatives to mainstream schooling.

> We wanted children to be in a learning environment that was about children. We have found enormous benefit from the children being outside and learning outside and having unstructured time for play … and by allowing children to experiment and use natural things to answer their wonderings.

> (ABC News Report, 2019 on "Nature Community School")
> [News story link removed and school renamed to maintain anonymity].

Andrew and Judy talked about young children being at the centre of the conception of schooling that informed the development of their public schools:

> *Andrew: It started when I was at Whyalla's Behaviour Support Unit, and just seeing schools spit really nice kids out. You know, they didn't behave particularly nicely at times, but at other times they were fantastic. And it just was that sort of sense of there's something wrong here, and I guess myself, schooling wasn't great for me, and so I think it was my own sense of I don't want to be an educator that steals from kids.*

> *Judy: It made sense...to be a Nature School. I was really worried about how anxious the kids were....We started taking the kids outside to do Maths and—and there was a difference. They relaxed and started to engage. We started using stones and sticks. We would use puddles and clouds, and all of that as part of the learning, and it was just so different.... The outside was such a connection for kids that made a difference when we were teaching.*

Andrew and Judy's leadership work and professional identities were driven by all-abiding "care" for young people. Leadership work that was caring as an ontological way of being defined the essence of these two leaders' professional identities.

Exercising freedom and authority

Both Andrew and Judy were committed to using time and place creatively to put children at the centre of education and trusting them to do the right thing.

> *Andrew: We wanted to break down this notion of subjects, I guess we knew it was different because we had our Year 7s doing sit-outs on the oval, refusing to be a part of the new restructure, and we're kind of going this is fantastic (laughing), they're ... taking the control we want them to have while they're protesting it (laughing).*

> *Judy: Because I really believe that a learning environment should be as good as it can be. You're told (referring to the DfE) you have power to do lots, "be creative in what you're doing."*

> *"Okay, what can I do that's creative and what can I do that's different?"*

> *Well, we've got the nature village up there (referring to a nature trail adjacent to the school), and we have a day where children spend ... doing things like core routines to build their sensory awareness, and then there are small groups*

and some ... do orienteering and some ... will do building, making things using
natural materials.

Their "care" respected young people as learners, demonstrated by taking steps to ensure they could participate in an education that was meaningful to them. This drew into play their efforts to restructure school learning and to foster pedagogies of engagement imbued with relational responsiveness to keep more young people connected to learning.

Growing the school

The first indicators of success came from the word of mouth of parents and children as they talked about what was happening at the school.

> *Judy: We decided that in Term 2 of that year, first day, we would have just a whole*
> *day outside and see what happened. The kids were just absolutely fantastic. From this*
> *simple beginning we started to generate some enrolments.... I did some marketing,*
> *unaware that it was actually marketing, but just telling our story and then word of*
> *mouth, and within five years we had gone from 27 students to 120 students and a*
> *waiting list.*

> *Andrew: The school started growing as the word spread. So yeah, there was a lot of*
> *the parents just wanting something different for their kids. So more your middle-class*
> *families that were then coming into Alberton—which was really good for it, in terms*
> *of creating balance.*

Care and courage meant a willingness to listen deeply to the community and then respond in practice with experimental work trialled in the interests of parents and young people. Care and courage that overrode possible failure became a modus operandi for Judy and Andrew to carry on.

Initial support through the district model

Andrew and Judy's initial approaches to EDs allowed new ideas for schooling restructure and growth if it fitted with the broad aim of improving outcomes and didn't work against departmental mandates. Andrew's beginning school restructure was to enable work with the community to integrate students into broad groupings, rather than age related grades. Judy too found support in looking to build enrolments through developing a nature-based curriculum that challenged early childhood students.

> *Andrew: When we first had the idea of restructuring the school, I knew I was doing*
> *something different because I went to my regional director and said, "I've got this*
> *idea, can I do it?" She said: "Go for it Andrew, just don't screw it up" (laughing). I*
> *could live with that. I thought, "Yep, that's fine."*

> *Judy: In that first year the educational director was great. I worked with her and we thought we could start to look at early years and build the enrolments that way. We went to the Department for Education. We met with the executive director of schools and the person in charge of the early childhood sector at that time.*

> *After that ED left... (the Department) simply said, "No, you cannot do that."*

Andrew and Judy embodied the courage to care in their leadership agendas for school growth and structural change. They were driven to speak with courage emboldened by their care for community to the department's powerful bureaucrats. Care was overwhelming in their professional identities and "ways of being" as leaders—a dogged determination to hold "care" in place, manifesting in all of their organisational relations.

The erosion of freedoms

The changes that Judy and Andrew pursued in their schools were supported within their school and community because they were better meeting the learning needs of students. However, in regional Partnership meetings, they were regarded with scepticism and suspicion by other school leaders. Andrew uses the words "ripped to shreds" to talk about the gossip and undermining that occurred in meetings after other school leaders came to visit. Judy echoes this; rather than try to understand the theory and practice of bush learning, leaders in her Partnership leadership group dismissed the school as doing "weird stuff."

> *Andrew: Word was beginning to get out that we were trying new things. It started with mates that I'd known from different schools, people that I had worked with, and had been my colleagues in different environments and some of the local principals ... all coming. We invited them in one after the other.... They just came and ripped us to shreds. It was a bizarre experience.*

> *Judy: I found the Partnerships meetings really a waste of time. There were people in that room voicing that we're the school that does the weird stuff. I tried to get out of them as much as I could, and (the ED) didn't appreciate that. There was no professional development (in the Partnership meetings)...it felt like more admin and what the Department wanted done.*

Andrew and Judy experienced support from their school communities but encountered scepticism from their colleagues. They felt this very deeply—a rejection of who they were as people and professional leaders from the very leaders with whom they had worked and once trusted. Care in being a leader can mean facing and feeling the fear of others to unfamiliar ideas and practices. This emanates from imposed managerial leadership norms where anything beyond the habitual ways of doing and thinking about leadership in schools is viewed with suspicion.

Compliance over context

Under the latest iteration of NPM schools were required to act in concert, measured by their ability to contribute to the metrics that would contribute to a world class education system in a decade. At the centre of the metrics were increased outcomes in the federally mandated standardised tests called the National Assessment Plan for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Each teacher and principal was to be held accountable for delivering increased outcomes on the test. Attainment in the test became the proxy for a good teacher and good principal. Both Andrew and Judy saw the test as a distraction from much needed reforms in their schools. Pressuring them to conform to the idea that test results meant progress took both of them away from the work they needed to do. Workload intensification became one of the tools by which that compliance was enforced.

> *Judy: The new education director came and no matter what we did, for whatever reason, it was just about NAPLAN results. Our NAPLAN results were good but only half of our kids did NAPLAN because their parents didn't want them to.*

> *I think there was something in the ED's head that said I was not toeing the line and that I wasn't going to be allowed to do anything that was not toeing the line.*

> *We could see growth. It was, you know growth—reading, attendance, enrolments, students' feeling less anxious—all of those growths!*

> *The ED wanted to see things that she was used to.*

> *I wasn't toeing the line. She didn't like that.*

> *Andrew: Then the Department started to reorganise. I didn't have time to be involved in the Education Department's distractions and administrivia. Where I had been given the go ahead and recognition under the old structures, under the new arrangement we were being noticed. Just as we were starting to get skilled enough to do this stuff, we were being hampered in the system by our success.*

> *Then there were a number of education directors, each of them in their own different way wanting to push me into a more compliant role.*

> *I remember this conversation I'd had with my ED around, "I don't want to go to these meetings with the other schools in the Partnership because there are people in that room voicing that we're the school that does the weird shit. How do you think that goes for my mental health and so forth?" I said, "I've got these other partnerships outside the official channels with the universities, internationally with other innovative schools…. I'm working with these people." The ED said, "We're*

> *not interested in universities, you need to focus on The Department. You need to be*
> *a Departmental citizen. I thought "Screw this, I'm working with the universities.".*

> *So ... I wasn't being a good Department citizen.... I knew the support was gone.*

Coercive pressure from above and support from below drew Andrew and Judy into an ontological state of professional tension and anxiety. This was because their "felt" leadership need and purpose was under attack by the policy and practice discourse of the Partnerships. Despite this, they persisted with their agendas, holding in place the courage to care.

Casualties of a centralised system

The principal's job is always hard emotional and intellectual labour (Day, 2017; Santoro, 2021)—work that does not add to children's learning but is mandated by Education Department compliance demands often gets principals doing the "system's" work. The two schools' increases in enrolments demonstrated that they had the support of the community and that support was formalised through the schools' locally elected school council (the equivalent of the New Zealand school board of trustees).

> *Andrew: Early on I would spend a lot of time with the kids.... As we grew it became*
> *harder to do this.... Because so much of my energy was being used on fighting for*
> *what we had, I spent less and less time with them, with the kids. It affected my*
> *mental health. I still had the support of the school council: they refused to sign off*
> *on the departmental school review because they didn't see it reflecting our school.*
> *The school had champions in the community but all that did was mean we were*
> *noticed more. I wasn't being the school leader I needed to be because I was trying*
> *to do everything with shackles on. So now get out of the sinking ship and start again*
> *really.*

> *Judy: We did weekly sessions with a renowned American environmental educator…*
> *and so we've been there and visited him. We've brought him out here, which was*
> *interesting, because we've done a couple of conferences at a school around learning*
> *and nature, and not one person from the Partnership ever came. People from*
> *everywhere else, even interstate. Not one person from the Education Department.*

> *The Department that doesn't want to learn … doesn't want to actually grow with*
> *what's happening or something. It just became more and more stressful. The clear*
> *message was "We don't want you out there!"*

> *So, I left....*

For Andrew and Judy, the injury that this fight inflicted upon their professional identities and

work pushed them out of the SA public education system. They recognised that there was no way forward but "out" if they were to stay true to themselves as caring leaders who also cared about their own wellbeing.

Leaving public education to do public education

Changes to the educational economics in Australia opened a door for Andrew and Judy. Their ability to seek to open a new and socially just form of schooling is an anomaly of decades old funding wars where Australia's state governments were seen as having responsibility for "public education" and the federal government adopted the responsibility to fund private education that included both the Catholic and independent sectors. Under what became known as Gonski[1], named after the head of two reports into federal school funding, each student was entitled to a base level funding, called the Student Resource Standard (SRS)[2] that was supplemented to counter dimensions of educational disadvantage. The labyrinthine politics of the funding wars have meant that it is not only financially possible to now establish new independent schools but there is now a lighter touch of accountability and **with** access **to** significant extra funding on top of the SRS for disadvantaged students. So, under the neo-liberal mantra of choice (Windle, 2014), they are both reinventing their original public education vision, building on the success of their previous schools with a new source of funding and the freedom that comes with being outside the public education system.

> ***Andrew:*** *The aim is to start again without the shackles on. Picking myself up from three years ago and going, "All right now, no shackles, let's go." With the knowledge I have now, with the community I know, just launch from there. I have a name, Ngutu College. We have a clear way of describing the school. Ngutu College: Aboriginal culture as its soul, children as its heart, the arts as its spine.* (Ngutu is an Indigenous word meaning knowledge)

> *I have a Board.... I have a premises. I have champions and funders.*

> *I have potential enrolments and we know that the number we will start with will build and be sustainable. We know that funding works because I would have around one and a half times the funding available to me than I would in the State system.*

> ***Judy:*** *We are right at the beginning but there is interest in enrolments, there are people who will support our vision and be on the Board, community members, environmentalists, entrepreneurs. We've got a couple of parents, got a big group around one town. I've got a meeting with our local MP in a couple of weeks.*

For Andrew and Judy, new hope opened to creatively care for students by doing public schooling another way. Hope became present upon leaving, dreaming with others who had similar hopes and

aspirations for young people buoyed their imaginings.

Their vision is the same

Andrew and Judy face the daunting task of reviving and reaffirming their vision for a public education that meets the needs of the children and families for whom they have worked over the last two decades. They hold true to a vision of education that serves the public and their embodiment of care and courage (Stengel, 2018; Trout, 2018) in leadership through practice now outside the system.

> *Andrew: The vision is still really the same about equitable access and giving every child a chance to be exposed to opportunities that other kids are exposed to ... and being able to put them in touch with their potential passion. If you're coming from poverty, school is your only hope and if school is shut down on you, you're screwed. This is about reimagining what that vision could be without the shackles on.*

> *Judy: The school would be built on about believing that we need to care for the earth, and kids to learn.... Let's teach the kids to love the earth, before we ask them to save it. Yeah. And so that's it, how can we live, how can we be a school that's sustainable, that's environmentally friendly that doesn't use plastic, that resources are really simple.*

Imaginings expanded and creativity exhumed—needs could be addressed with innovation now enabled. Freedom to be and do for young people based upon their presenting needs was now available.

Public education is evolving

Richard Teese (2006) wrote that disadvantaged schools are the engine room of productive change because they are "condemned to innovate" (p.1). Our two principals indicated socially just innovation and inclusion is no longer celebrated in our current public education state system—something that will leave our state poorer.

> *Judy: We have to look outside of thinking that Public Education is only the Education Department. You need some courage to look outside of that now.*

> *It's not just disadvantaged kids that are failing now. All the kids, there's so many kids that are failing and not coming out with the experiences and the learning around that, is evident of being at school for however many years they were at school—which was a long time, 12 years or whatever. It's so sad. We need to do something different. I don't think the model of education we have is about kids at all. The model's about politics, and I think it's about conformity and being chained. It's not just staff that feel chained, it's everything. It's absolutely everything—the children, the parents.*

> *Public education is evolving. I've actually thought about putting that in somewhere in*

the blurb that this is the new public school, or the new public education. The vision is to build on the work we had done, but outside the system. It will be an outdoor school. Our flexibility will be one of the most important things. And a really close working together with families, around what families actually need for their kids.... There is just a growing number of families that are looking for that opportunity to have some sort of flexibility in their schooling.

Andrew and Judy have found a space outside of public education where their vision for public schooling and the ability to care for students in practice can be enabled. They must meet the standards to be certified as a school, which includes following the national curriculum framework and reporting against national benchmarks, but as independent businesses they are responsible to their board and community and not a top-down bureaucracy (Reid, 2020). They have found a space "to be" as educational leaders, where the communities with and for whom they work, value their innovative contributions.

Part 3: Discussion

Judy and Andrew are now pursuing their socially-just school aspirations outside of the public education system. Their reason for leaving public education is that the characteristics that defined public education as socially just are being swept away by a system intoxicated with "econometrics," sameness, and command and control from the centre. Our historiography and lived experience phenomenological analysis indicates the characteristics of SA public education are being overridden by a bureaucracy pursuing school principal compliance within a neo-liberalised education system (Connell, 2013), taking the life out of "life in schools" (McLaren, 2015, p.1). What is being silenced? The humanity of education and the ability for leaders and teachers to think, create and educate differently … the defining characteristics of principals who care deeply for students, fostering a healthy public school and a healthy public education system.

The courage to care

Andrew and Judy were closest to knowing what is best for their school, their students and their community. The courage and care in their professional ways of being, meant they were unable to serve and speak the required corporate discourse. Caring, for them, meant resistance to the narrowing of public education. Their journey of courage and care to attend to student and community needs within a risk averse public education system, is clearly on show in their exchanges with ED disciplinary command and control management decrees. However, they still they carried on, being true to themselves, young people, and the community they served. The pressure to be a "good" departmental citizen meant reduced time to respond to the students and the community which led to an ontological tension in their professional lives, between service to students and serving the official knowledge and requirements of the bureaucracy (Dolan, 2020b).

Feelings are of "fundamental importance in teaching and to teachers" (Nias, 1996, p. 293) and of course equally so for school principals. School leaders and teachers experience a vast array of feelings throughout their careers (Hargreaves, 2005) and in their daily practices. Moreover, according to Nias (1996), when teachers invest their selves in their profession, their feelings and professional identities can become merged with each other. This was the case for Andrew and Judy; their in-school identities of caring, creative and courageous leadership defined them as people both in school and out. Authentic school leaders don't let go of who they are at work when they leave work—it is always there. This was clear in Andrew and Judy's conversations and this is why, when their efforts to develop a better place for students to be and learn became lived as daily tensions, they perceived no choice for but to leave and start again.

Conclusion

Andrew and Judy embodied and enacted the courage to care (Maister, 1999) and held to this deeply moral way of being throughout their contestations with the Education Department, where they found themselves caught in an ontological state of paradox, told to work "with the grain" of official policy but compelled because of who they were and the ethics of their being, to "work against the grain," when they discerned policy was not in the best interests of their students or community. They felt this tension deeply and of course they left.

Both found a way to address this paradox by courageously taking their public-school aspirations into another sector. They have been lost to the Public Education system as have the families who have enrolled their children in Ngutu. The creativity of these children won't inform other public schools in the system on how to live socially just and sustainable lives. Alongside Andrew and Judy's decision to leave public to do public education, significant changes are presenting across Australia's schooling ecosystem. In the last seven years, other independent small schools have grown in number since former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's Liberal National Coalition Government ratified the introduction of the Gonski 2.0 SRS in 2013 along with the introduction of Special Assistance Funding in 2015.[3]

Two and a half years after leaving the Education Department, Andrew's independent school (Ngutu), has grown from 90 students in 2021 to 170 in 2022. Judy is now working with schools and parents to develop creative nature play and recently held a formal community event for her proposed nature school, which opens its doors to young people in 2023. During this time, public school principals have witnessed the steady erosion of the characteristics of public education, namely; equity, diversity and inclusion. For many, like Andrew and Judy, this erosion has meant they are working in a system and a "state" of paradox (Dolan, 2020b),

Andrew and Judy's story of leaving public schooling for new work in the independent sector echoes a changing educational landscape underway in Australia. Given that all schools in Australia now receive substantial government funding, traditionally the domain of the public schooling

sector, their independent status offers more opportunity to meet the needs of their students free from the shackles of compliance to a single ideology. What presents is a new way to honour the social justice characteristics of public education by creating new schooling entities in the non-government sectors.

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Footnotes

[1]Gonski 2.0 SRS (2013) consists of two parts: base funding and loadings. Base funding comprises a standard amount for each student – which in 2018 is $10,953 for primary students and $13,764 for secondary students. These amounts grow over time. For non-government schools, the SRS takes into account a school community's capacity to contribute.

[2]The School Resource Standard (SRS) is an estimate of how much total public funding a school needs to meet its students' educational needs, and is based on recommendations from the 2011 Review of Funding for Schooling, led by Mr David Gonski.

[3]Special Assistance Schools cater for students with behavioural or mental health issues and receive the full SRS funding amount

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