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Positional Matters: School Leaders Engaging with National Equity Agendas

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ABSTRACT: This paper claims a central role for school leaders (principals and head teachers) in the enactment of social justice policy in schools, who act as key agents or ‘gate keepers’ for what counts as social justice in their contexts of practice. Social justice means different things in different contexts depending on where leaders – who use policy as an opportunity to advance what they think is achievable within the limits of available resources – are positioned in the field and how that defines their stances. Drawing on qualitative data generated through in-depth interviews with ten secondary school principals in two Australian cities, the paper analyses the engagement of school leaders with nationally prescribed equity-related policies. Our analysis shows that, depending on the institutional ethos and resources of schools and their own social justice dispositions, school leaders tend to take different stances towards nationally defined equity agendas. Their responses range from compliance to compromise to contest. The paper suggests that doing social justice in schools can never be unilateral, as policy documents suppose, but is characterised by context-informed policy translation, mediated by a range of interactive forces and interests.

Keywords: policy translation; principals; school leaders; head-teachers; social justice; critical policy discourse analysis; contexts; stances; position; position-taking

Introduction

This paper reports on the interplay of contexts and stances of secondary school leaders (i.e. head-teachers or principals)¹ in translating education policy into practice (Ball et al. 2012), specifically policies that are ostensibly aimed at achieving social justice in Australian schools. Social justice in Australian schooling is an elusive ambition, a wicked problem (Churchman, 1967). In *the Adelaide Declaration*, the Council of Australian Governments identified social justice as one of the national goals of schooling and set out to address the effects of socio-economic status, geographical location, Indigeneity, and other social categories on educational opportunities and learning outcomes of students (MCEETYA, 1999). Despite numerous policy initiatives that followed the Declaration, educational inequalities persist (Kenway, 2013). As is the case in many comparable economies, educational disadvantage is closely aligned with the socioeconomic disadvantages of students and schools (Shepherd & Bonnor, 2014). In this paper, we examine these issues of social justice in schools in relation to key policy initiatives that foreground equity and quality goals in the school system, namely the Australian National Assessment Program, Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), and the Gonski Review of School Funding (Gonski et al., 2011). We use the two policies as illustrative of policies mobilised to address the problem of inequality as a major agenda. In other words, we did not analyse the texts but rather we asked school leaders how they responded to equity provisions in these policies.

¹ In the education system in which our study is located, the **school** leader with final responsibility within schools is referred to as the ‘principal’. Some readers will be more familiar with the term ‘head-teacher’. In this article, we tend to use the terms ‘head-teacher’ and ‘school leader’ interchangeably with ‘principal’.

As a standardised test for students in Years Three, Five, Seven and Nine, NAPLAN was introduced in Australia in 2008, claiming to measure basic skills in literacy and numeracy (ACARA, 2016). The assumption is that standardized test results – their comparison mediated by the socioeconomic background of schools, and their subsequent publication for consumption by the public (through the Australian Government’s *My School* website, operational since 2010) – ensure transparency and accountability in achieving excellence and equity in schooling (Gillard, 2008; Gorur, 2013; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). In introducing NAPLAN, then Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard noted, “We need all of this information [i.e. national assessment results], not for the production of crude league tables but to inform a real program to address disadvantage” (Gillard, 2008, para. #36).² Relatedly, the Gonski Review recommended school reform through a focus on the redistribution of funding to address educational inequality resulting from socioeconomic disadvantage (Goski et al., 2011). Recognizing the persistence of inequality in the nation’s school system, the Review called for an equitable funding arrangement “to ensure that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions”, and this means that “all students must have access to an acceptable international standard of education, regardless of where they live or the school they attend” (Gonski et al., 2011, p. 105).

In principle, these two policies claim an interest in social justice given their focus on “ensuring that personal or social circumstances do not hinder achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion)” (OECD, 2015, p.43). In particular, NAPLAN highlights the role of school-based factors in mediating alignments between school background and student learning outcomes (Lingard, Sellar & Savage, 2014). It recognizes that equity needs and goals are intricately connected with curricular organization, pedagogic work, and leadership roles at school level. The Gonski Review is similarly concerned with inequities, showing that the proportion of students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds is different across government, Catholic and independent schools. It particularly draws attention to the fact that there exists a disproportionate concentration of students from disadvantage backgrounds in the government school sector. As Kenway (2013, p.304) observes, often “government and independent schools are in close geographical proximity, but the two sectors are educationally, socially, culturally and materially worlds apart.” These insights from the Gonski Review and by Kenway highlight the importance of investigating divergences and convergences in principals’ tactics of policy translation across different school types and sectors in the nation’s education system. Accepting the role of school leadership in promoting equity (OECD, 2008), we specifically examined responses of principals to national policies in relation to their contexts of practice.

Previous research (e.g. Ball et al., 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Braun et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2013) highlights the importance of context in policy enactment. However, this literature does not address the interaction of context and tactics of policy engagement. It does not explain why different actors in different contexts act in the ways they do. Our point of departure from this literature is that principals’ tactical engagement with equity policies varies according to their positions in the field of practice. Taking schools of different sectoral and socio-economic

² The Australian Productivity Commission recently reported (September 2016) that no significant improvement in student achievement had been achieved since NAPLAN’s introduction and in some cases it had slipped, despite a 14% increase in spending per student over the last decade including spending on standardized tests.

backgrounds as an exemplary case, we offer a more nuanced account of the interplay of position and stance in equity policy enactment. Specifically, we are interested in what stances (or dispositions, ‘position-takings’) are possible from different positions; that is, what principals are disposed to do in relation to policy and what can be done from where they are located. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) observe, practices are never solely the product of the habitus but are always generated in relation to field positions. These distinctions allow us to extend current understandings of principals as policy agents. Our interests in both position *and* stance organise the analysis into its two main parts. We ask what these mean for realising policy and particularly for social justice in schooling. Our foregrounding of both context *and* tactic in policy enactment allows us to show that – depending on the availability of resources attached to policy provisions, the institutional ethos of the school, and social justice dispositions of school leaders – the responses of school leaders to national equity policies can be characterised as stances of compliance, compromise or contest.

The paper proceeds below in four sections. The first gives an account of the study’s methodological approach and what counts as data. Then, following a brief discussion on key concepts informing the analysis, the third section identifies stances of *compliance*, *compromise* and *contest* that principals in our study employed in the enactment of policy. Section four follows, arguing that these stances are not just the result of the social justice dispositions of principals but are mediated by the volume and composition of the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) associated with their schools, which informs their standing or position within the field. Specifically, the positioning of principals is a function of a school’s *embodied*, *objectified* and *institutionalised* cultural capital. The paper concludes that certain stances are more likely from certain positions and thus the enactment of social justice policy is necessarily varied. In particular, our data suggests that compliance is a more likely stance of principals in disadvantaged schools whereas contest is a more likely stance of principals in advantaged schools.

Methodology and Data

Following Bourdieu (1990a), we see the school as a field of practice – a structured space of social positions and interrelations. Understanding how agents perform their institutional roles requires mapping objective structures and subjective dispositions that define positions and position-takings in the field. Bearing this in mind, the paper is guided by an interpretive approach to policy study (Wagenaar, 2015). In this approach to policy analysis, the analytical focus is on understanding institutional settings and individual meanings that shape actions and inactions in relation to the implementation of nationally defined equity policies. Making sense of policy processes requires an interpretive approach to texts, discourses and practices. Policy processes involve arenas of struggle over systems of meaning. From text production to tactical translation of texts to action, policy agents use discursive devices as a means to structure and orient domains of activity, including policymaking and policy enactment. A ‘policy-as-discourse’ approach emphasises assumptions and ideological orientations underpinning a particular policy framing (Ball, 1994; Author 1999). One interest in a critical approach to policy analysis is what a policy intends to solve and what policy levers are put in place to achieve intended goals. Its critical focus entails examining the framing of policy instruments and its implications for policy enactment (translation and implementation). A critical analysis of policy enactment sees policy as a form of power struggle to construct the policy message and to define feasible tactics of enactment. For instance, critical policy analysis draws attention to who defines the boundaries in the constructions of ‘social exclusion’ and ‘social inclusion’ in education systems, and with what consequences (Author

2019). It uncovers the governing beliefs in policy provisions and statements, and problematizes what could be said vis-à-vis what was actually said, for example, in relation to addressing the problem of inequality in school systems (Author, 2001). Through making injustice apparent, critical analysis is also strategic in challenging any ‘false consciousness’ of the disadvantaged.

Our account of equity policy enactment in schools reflects Bourdieu’s three-step analysis of fields of practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 104-105). First, one needs to investigate the positioning of the field of practice in relation to the “field of power” where economic and political capital necessary for the functioning of other specific fields resides. In the context of our study, the state retains political and economic power to regulate practices in the school as a subfield. For example, with its own stakes (e.g. curriculum, knowledge and qualifications), agents (e.g. teachers, students and principals) and stances (e.g. learning, teaching and leadership), the school can be seen as a field of practice. As such, it operates in relation to the national policy space (the field of power) that provides political legitimation, economic resources, and moral justification for tackling educational disadvantage. To emphasize these power relations, we chose schools of different sectoral and socio-economic status, with different levels of autonomy in terms of their relationship with the field of power. Here autonomy of the school is reflected in its “ability to legitimate existing social relations within itself through a defense of its doxa, reason, and value for the field’s existence and, generally speaking, “less autonomous fields are subject to greater outside influence upon the contested value of capitals within them” (Swartz, 1997, pp. 126–127).

Second, the analyst needs to map “the objective structures of the relations between the positions occupied by the agents” in the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.105). This is mainly because, notwithstanding formal rules and regulations, positions in the field of practice influence agents’ tactics of engagement. The responses of school leaders to external expectations, including equity policy provisions, are a function of their own values and the volume and structure of capital at their disposal. The sectoral and socio-economic diversity of the schools included in this study means that we are able to compare differences in positions and position-takings of the head-teachers. Third, an investigation of a field of practice should be attentive to the habitus of agents, which refers to “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p.53). As the habitus guides practice, for school principals, what they do and don’t do in relation to the policy pronouncement depends in part on their personal dispositions to build an inclusive school environment. As Bourdieu (2015) notes, “the true principle of the functioning of the institution” manifests in the “unconscious adjustment of positions and dispositions” (p.314). Shedding light on the social justice dispositions of school leaders is important for understanding how they might enact equity policies given the context of the school. For example, a mismatch between the social justice disposition of a principal and the space of social justice work (e.g. socio-economic backgrounds and institutional ethos of the school) means that there is an opportunity for deliberation on personal values and their implications for policy practice. Although dispositions operate at a tacit level, in our study principals were encouraged to bring these to the fore through stimulated reflection (Author 2017).

The study on which this paper reports, is part of a larger project investigating the social justice dispositions of teachers and its influence on their pedagogy. The project sought to understand the sources of authority informing the school’s commitments to social justice and how the school’s commitments to social justice were conveyed to and instilled within teachers. Six advantaged and four disadvantaged schools in Brisbane and Melbourne were

selected based on their Year nine students' NAPLAN results published on the Australian Government's *My School* website (ACARA, 2010). We used 'advantage' and 'disadvantage' to describe the location of these schools at the extremes of academic achievement on NAPLAN tests, and the alignment of these results with students' socio-educational advantage. Research in Australia has shown that students in advantaged schools tend to be from high socioeconomic backgrounds with high academic achievement; whereas students in disadvantaged schools tend to be from low socioeconomic backgrounds with low academic achievement (Teese, 2011).

In this paper we draw on a subset of qualitative data produced through in-depth interviews with ten principals. These interviews generated in-depth accounts of the role of school context in shaping the positions and position-takings of principals in relation to equity policy implementation. In the interviews, we juxtaposed stated beliefs and actions as a way of encouraging these school leaders to reflect and comment on their policy engagement. We tried to stimulate what Bourdieu (1990b) describes as a 'consciousness awakening' – given that dispositions (that constitute the habitus) reside below the level of consciousness. The data generation particularly focused on the authorising of social justice work stipulated in such policies as the Australian National Assessment Plan, Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), and the Gonski Review of School Funding (Gonski et al., 2011). Our focus on principals was informed by the view that school leadership is central to achieving efficiency and social justice goals (Fullan, 2003; Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008). In this paper we take social justice to broadly encompass a fair redistribution of resources and opportunities, a recognition of who people are as they name themselves and agency freedom to voice and to participate in decisions that directly affect them (Authors, 2015; Fraser, 2007; Sen, 2009).

In analyzing the data, we identified convergences and divergencies in principals' responses to nationally defined equity agendas. We drew on the policy analysis literature and Bourdieu's thinking tools to grasp the contextual dynamics of policy enactment in these convergences and divergencies. That is, we moved between the empirical data and the research and theoretical literature to elucidate the positions (resources, institutional ethos and social justice dispositions) and position-takings (compliance, compromise and contest) of principals as policy actors (see Table 1). In this way we identified themes in the interview data as 'coherent and explicable' topics (Green et al., 2007). The analysis derived from this process is presented in three categories: the first read from the perspective of principals' tactics of engagement (their stance) and the second from the perspective of their contextual positioning. The third category covers the intersection of context and tactics – or position and stances.

Principals' Tactics of Engagement with National Equity Agendas

Policies are declarations of desirability (Palonen, 2003). They present conditions of possibility and constraint and are open to discretionary decisions. In examining the interplay of position and position-taking in equity policy enactment, we made a conscious choice to use the term tactics rather than strategies. As Author (2003, p. 42) note:

Tactics in contexts of policy production are about making the most of one's opportunities, of spaces: 'vigilantly mak[ing] use of cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of proprietary powers. It poaches them. It creates surprises in them' (de Certeau, 1984: 37).

Whereas in Bourdieu's (1977, 1990a) theory of practice, strategies are dispositional – they are “tacit and prereflective rather than conscious plans” (Swartz, 1997, p.70). In this sense, the notion of strategy does not include premeditated activities. For example, in certain contexts, in enacting equity policies, school leaders draw on their deeply inculcated social justice dispositions. They tend to unconsciously adapt their equity responses to emerging opportunities and constraints imposed by nationally defined policy agendas. However, in other contexts, policy work necessitates rational calculation. As shown in our analysis, how and the extent to which head-teachers engage with nationally defined equity provisions depend on the resources and/or institutional ethos of the school. We use strategy and tactic respectively to draw attention to this difference between the dispositional and the intentional.

The policy sociology literature suggests that policy actors such as school leaders are not ‘naïve readers’ who uncritically conform with what is in an official document (Ball et al., 2012; Bowe et al., 1992; Author, 2003). As it moves from contexts of text production to contexts of practice, policy is open to interpretation and the creative responses of actors. As key policy actors in school, principals play critical roles in policy enactment – they make sense of the policy in question and communicate with teachers (interpretation), and organise their creative responses in the form of artefacts and procedures (translation) (Ball et al., 2011a). Principals engage in policy translation and interpretation when they form narratives about the vision of their school and the place of the policies in it. They exercise their agency to make decisions about what is to be done and then commit resources to ensure that their decisions are ‘realised’ (Foucault 1972; Author 2003). Thus, differences in policy effects can be attributable not just to differences in contexts of practice but to differently positioned actors within contexts and associated variations in interpretation and translation of policy provisions. In short, policies are adapted to contexts of practice. As Sultana (2008: 14) argues, policy implementation “unfolds as a process of mutual adaptation, with implementers trying to make sense of – and manage – the demands made by policymakers in an attempt to reconcile them with their personal and professional world views” and the resources (material and cultural/symbolic) available to them. Informed by this notion of policy in the making, we aimed at making sense of relations between the positions and stances of principals and what this meant for their enactment of social justice policy. In this section, we discuss the first point.

In enacting equity policies, principals play vital roles in decoding what the problem of social injustice is framed to be, and what instruments are needed to address the problem. Salamon (2000) notes that as “different actors have their own perspectives, ethos, standard operating procedures, skills, and incentives, by determining the actors the choice of tool importantly influences the outcome of the process” (p.1627). He adds: “tool choices are also not just technical decisions. Rather, they are profoundly *political*: they give some actors, and therefore some perspectives, an advantage in determining how policies will be carried out” (Salamon, 2000, p.1627; emphasis added). We would add that choices of policy instruments are profoundly contextual – what is possible is in part determined by where one is positioned in the field of practice. For equity policy provisions to be realised, people with power such as principals need to deliberately intervene to address unjust inequalities in the school. The effectiveness of a head-teacher's social justice leadership is measured by the extent to which s/he manages to mobilise teachers' and other school communities' commitment to uphold the ideals of justice and equity in their daily professional practices. Specifically, we were interested in understanding the influences of the school context in implementing equity policies. In the analysis of the qualitative data, it is evident that principals as key policy actors are not passive implementers of policy. The findings show that doing social justice in schools

is characterised by moments of *compliance*, *compromise* and *contest*. These themes are discussed below in turn.

Compliance

In the context of disadvantaged public schools, compliance with policy pronouncements is a tactical choice. In schools where government is the main source of funding, head-teachers are expected to be compliant implementers. For instance, one of the disadvantaged community schools included in our study is positioned by its head-teacher as an "alternative setting" to the mainstream school system that serves "educationally at risk" individuals or "disengaged or marginalised kids" (Tim, Edgeware Community School). As the whole educational practice of the school is guided by social justice goals, there does not appear to be much ground for contest or compromise when it comes to enacting nationally set equity policies. Another head-teacher of a disadvantaged state school commented:

You know, if a policy says 'do this', you know, you don't like doing it, and you must do it, you'll do it. But you'll do it in the best way, deep down in your heart you don't want to do it, but you make sure that it's done. It's like when I have to lose staff, you know, you've got to do it. (Dean, Marrangba High School)³

Asked what happens if policies are at odds with what she thinks as a principal of a disadvantaged community school, Annette commented:

It's not about you, it's about getting the best for the kids. So, I don't see the point in emotionally investing in getting angry or upset or rampaging about 'this isn't fair' unless I can say because and here is my solution. ... when they [policies and initiatives] come into effect, then you maximise the benefits that you can. You make sure that every dollar you can gets to improving their educational opportunities for each kid. (Sutton Community School)

In social interactions such as policy translation, key actors (e.g. school principals) can show a readiness to act as officially prescribed, sometimes because the task asks them "to be no more and no less than [they are] prepared to be" (Goffman, 1961, pp.188-189). Commonly, education policies assume that teachers 'do as they are told' (Author, 2003). As Yeatman (1998) observes, the dominance of the neoliberal economic agenda in education policies presupposes an uncritical conformity of 'implementers' – for example, teachers and principals at school level. In other words, teachers and students are positioned as policy consumers rather than policy co-producers. Their agency is deactivated. With the prevalence of performance measures, it is evident in our data that principals of disadvantaged schools tend to enact policies within what Ball et al. (2012) refer to as 'a logic of conformity' (p.97).

Compromise

A school-based policy translation can also be seen as a form of negotiation between the general guidance as represented by policy provisions and restrictions, and personal and school-based values that actually shape daily practices and their effects on students. It highlights the process of accommodation and compromise but also position-taking and reluctance depending on the possibilities and constraints the policy presents to the practitioners. Compromise is about adjusting divergent interests. For principals, policy

³ Names of people, schools and places used in this paper are pseudonyms.

translation is ‘tactical engagement’ – it can be ‘refractive’ or ‘adjustive’ (Author, 2003). The principal of a disadvantaged government school noted that despite his view of the direction the school should take, if the policy says ‘you must do it’, he would follow the policy – compromising his own views and beliefs. He stated the dilemma as follows:

There are a number of things the policy says that you should do, and there’s a number of things it says that you must do. If it says that you must do it and you don’t do it, your job’s on the line. If you should do it, encouraged to do it, but you object to it, you’ll follow your moral compass. (Dean, Marrangba High School)

Moments of compromise can be evident in an advantaged school’s attempts to endorse the equity agenda but with an elitist tone. Commenting on the importance of context in translating social justice policies of the government, the principal of Heyington College argued that the school’s means-tested scholarship focuses on students from disadvantaged backgrounds “who might be able to succeed in this [advantaged school] environment” (Glenn, Heyington College). Likewise, the principal of Guildford Girls’ College expressed her support for the notion of ‘fair go’ in ensuring equitable distribution of educational opportunities. However, the equity instruments of the school seemed to be informed by an elitist logic of selecting students who would ‘benefit from the school’. She argued:

we would be accused of that, that’s what other schools would say of us, that we “cherry pick” kids, but what we try to do is get kids who would take advantage of the opportunities here, and we have a whole lot of co-curricular activities in this school, so opportunities for girls to be able to have a go at a broad range of things. (Deborah, Guildford Girls’ College)

In enacting social justice policy provisions, agents engage in tactical adjustment. Lipsky (2010) notes that for ‘street-level bureaucrats’ who directly interact with policy targets, ‘acceptable compromise’ between ‘policy as written’ and ‘policy as performed’ is a form of coping mechanism. It is a way of balancing the need for meeting external expectations and what is desirable and doable within one’s context of practice.

Contest

In other circumstances, official policy pronouncements face resistance. Principals are not just compliant implementers of policy or agents looking to compromise. At times they also contest. In the context of policy practice, agents do not mechanically submit to policy prescriptions. Policy is in large part ‘readerly’ (Ball, 2005) in the sense that it leaves actors in the context of practice a certain scope for maneuver – an openness to interpretation. While exploiting the ‘space’ created by the official discourse in relation to specific issues such as social justice work, school leaders may resist enacting policy. Often contest in policy translation stems from contradictions between school contexts (e.g. financial independence, institutional ethos, or social justice dispositions of principals and teachers) and policy provisions. As one principal noted, doing policy means regarding official policy as “a guide on the side”: when it aligns with the priorities and needs of the school, the policy acts as a “moral compass”; when it does not align, “the policy is wrong” and it should be contested (Dean, Marrangba High School). Asked to comment on the extent to which external policy debates and initiatives influence what he does as a school leader, Vincent, a principal of a semi-independent advantaged Catholic school, highlighted that his policy work is guided by a question of having ‘a point of view about certain things’. Asked how his school engages with

nationally defined equity policies, Matthew, a principal of an advantaged government school, reflected:

I think probably because I've been principal for a while *I'm not going to make any radical changes* in direction so what we've got in place is probably pretty much what I want and we've worked towards but it's also shaped by what we can afford. ... So basically what you're doing as a principal and with my business manager is making sure that we can afford what we're doing. (Matthew, Meadow Valley Secondary College, emphasis added)

In contesting nationally defined equity policies, principals apply different tactics of resistance, ranging from outright rejection to 'foot dragging' – slowing down the pace of enacting equity provision (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016). As Lipsky (2010) observes, "One can expect a distinct degree of noncompliance if lower-level workers' *interests* differ from the interests of those at higher levels, and the incentives and sanctions available to higher levels are not sufficient to prevail" (p.17, emphasis in original). Similarly, in an innovative study of policy enactment in schools, Ball and his colleagues show that, as critical 'gate keepers', school principals enact policies "from positions of their identities and subjectivities" (Ball et al., 2012, p.15). Viewing lower-level bureaucrats, such as school principals, "as having distinctly different interests and the resources to pursue those interests" makes it possible to expect discrepancies between policy declarations and policy enactments; and the explanation for the discrepancy is to be located in "the structure of the work situation from which workers' 'antagonistic' interests arise" (Lipsky, 2010, p.17). The implication for policy implementation analysis is that there is a need for contextual forces that mediate policy enactment. The following section takes up this point.

Principals' Contextual Positioning with respect to National Equity Agendas

Divergences in tactics of policy engagement (shown above) highlight the importance of understanding the contextual forces that mediate the translation of abstract policy ideas into concrete instruments and procedures in schools. Stances of head-teachers are defined by their contextual positioning in the field of practice, the school. In this section, we specifically discuss three contextual factors: the resources available to schools and principals, the institutional ethos of the school and the personal dispositions of principals.

Resources

For policies to have substantive impact, they need to be translated into effective actions, which in turn necessitate a pool of resources. A Bourdieuan theory of practice suggests that actors effectively perform their institutional roles when they have relevant species of capital that correspond to their positions (Bourdieu, 2015). As is evident in our study, when it comes to enacting equity-related policies, the notion of resources is closely linked with the quality of teachers and funding for targeted programs. For instance, economically advantaged schools are more able to attract teachers of their choosing and can finance targeted programs such as equity-related support systems. A principal of a well-resourced Catholic school highlighted the alignment of quality teachers and social justice work:

You know, teachers are the greatest resource that any school has to offer, so how can you ensure that those who are most disadvantaged have access to the best teachers? ... The students who have the most difficulty should get, well, every student should get the best possible teacher ... I had staff that used to ensure that

we are mindful of those who are most disadvantaged in our community. (Susan, Beckenham Girls Grammar)

It is also evident that policies are more visible when they are associated with funding. This was well articulated by a principal of a disadvantaged government school, who commented “policies are useful when they come with resources ... At the end of the day, you can have the most wonderful policy, but how are you going to resource it? (Dean, Marrangba High School). As March and Olsen (2006) note, “Even when actors are able to figure out what to do, a clear logic can only be followed when available resources make it possible to obey its prescriptions” (p.703). Matthew, a head-teacher of an advantaged government school (Valley Secondary College) commented: “if you try and implement an initiative and you’re not prepared to resource it well then you’re dooming it to failure.” For school leaders, allocating scarce resources among competing ends is a critical decision. Importantly, how schools translate equity policies is closely related to their socio-economic background. While economically privileged schools tend to operate on ‘autopilot’, with institutional ethos and personal orientations as a ‘moral compass’, their peers in disadvantaged government schools are more likely to align school work with government policies that come with more resources.

Institutional Ethos

To reiterate, policy translation is context-specific. Depending on the historical and cultural background of a school, a head-teacher’s social justice work is essentially framed by the categorical constructs of institutionally sanctioned narratives, strategies and indicators. This is particularly evident in Catholic schools, where the head-teachers associated equity-related policy practices to a Catholic ethos of social justice and community services. When schools draw on a strong religious ethos to inform their understanding of social justice and community services, as is the case with the Catholic School system, they are more likely to pursue social justice work regardless of government policy. The following story (from a disadvantaged Catholic school) is illustrative of this:

[A] young asylum seeker, [who] came to Australia in January from Iran through detention in Indonesia, did six months at ... a government secondary school, which specifically deals with new arrivals. He turned 18 in the beginning of September, and the school had to throw him out. ... They wouldn’t keep him because ... they were getting minimal funding for him... So [they] actually approached us and said, “Would you take him?” [That’s] part of our mission ... of course, of course we will take him. (Kathleen, St Leo’s College)

A strong institutional ethos of justice and fairness means that the presence of students from disadvantaged backgrounds is seen as an opportunity rather than a problematic situation that needs to be avoided. The Catholic school head-teachers in our study expressed an institutional ethos of social justice using such concepts as humility, respect, compassion, egalitarianism, dignity and so on, of the person. The value of a social justice institutional ethos is that often principals explain equity-related work in their schools in terms of developing sensitivities and empathic capacity towards students who experience injustice and disadvantage within the school. For example, a principal of an advantaged Catholic girls’ school stated:

... for us it’s ethos and it’s cultural ... it’s Christian ethos. Social justice is part of a Christian belief of service to others and that’s our motto for the school ... we’re not a pretentious community at all. We’re a school where we really expect, and I think the girls’ parents expect, that they roll their sleeves up and

get in and they contribute and immerse themselves in the community whether it's here or far beyond this school. (Susan, Beckenham Girls Grammar)

The three Catholic school principals interviewed in our study stressed that the Catholic ethos of social service and justice requires schools to attend to issues of disadvantage. This supports Ball et al.'s (2012) claim that policy enactment partly depends on “the degree to which particular policies will ‘fit’ or can be fitted within the existing ethos and culture of the school” (Ball et al., 2012, p.10). Likewise, in a large-scale survey of school values and the education of asylum-seeker and refugee children in England, Arnot and Pinson (2005) found that schools with an ‘ethos of inclusion’ were more likely to create supportive learning for the disadvantaged. However, with the prevalence of neoliberal educational governance, institutional values of schools are changing in the sense that schools are increasingly pushed to prioritize efficiency and excellence over social goals of equity and inclusion (see Pinto, 2015; Kiddie, 2017).

Personal Dispositions

A position carries with it the power to name and frame decisions that fit interests of the field. However, the relation between position and position-taking is not an automated one. This is partly because position-taking involves an element of ‘agency freedom’ engendered by dispositions that operate as schemes of perception and appreciation in the field of practice. In doing social justice work, school leaders draw on their subjective interpretations of the policy, which are, in turn, guided by their habitus (a system of durable dispositions) that integrates the past and “functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.83). In our analysis, we were particularly interested in the social justice dispositions of principals, which reveal their orientations to what is socially and morally fair, just and equitable. We see social justice dispositions in school leaders as closely related to what Lingard et al. (2003) refer to as a “productive leadership habitus” (p.147) or what might more appropriately (cf. Reay 2004) be termed a productive leadership *disposition*. That is, effective leadership for learning should equally be concerned with addressing inequalities. Our intention was to understand the role of school leaders’ dispositions to name and act on an issue of social injustice in their respective schools, in doing the work of equity policy translation. Carolyn, a leader of an advantaged Catholic school (Mercy Girls College), emphasised that the intersection of personal values and institutional ethos informed social justice work of the school. For Deborah, a principal of an advantaged government school, equity programs and activities in her school are guided by her social justice values, which she attributes to her upbringing and educational background. These:

... probably come from having a father who was a unionist. There was always that sense in our family of a “fair go” for people ... [and] being educated by nuns [in a country Catholic school] there were probably some values that shaped my approach to things as a consequence of that. (Deborah, Guildford Girls College)

We concur with Fullan (2003) that school leadership should be underlined by a moral purpose – a readiness to make ‘a positive difference’. In *Leading Learning*, Lingard et al. (2003) argue: “while good pedagogies and good assessment practices matter, they need to be supported by a broad system commitment to social justice” (p.49). Head-teachers with social justice dispositions tend to possess “consciousness and passion for justice” and “the skills and knowledge to do the work” (Marshall & Oliva 2006, p.11). While the first attribute enables them to be critically aware of conditions of oppression, exclusion, and marginalisation in their schools, the second is a vital resource to transform the condition. Often institutions take

actions to adjust “agents to their jobs, or, more precisely, their dispositions to their positions” (Bourdieu, 2015, p.313). Like other institutions, schools use carefully crafted recruitment criteria to make sure that objective positions are well aligned with subjective dispositions of occupants of the position, including head-teachers.

The Confluence of Position and Stance

In a Bourdian analysis of school leadership, Thomson (2010) argued that principals are key policy actors and occupy important positions in the field of practice. Gunter and Forrester (2009) note further that as policy actors head-teachers are not simply ‘reform deliverers’. Rather, in light of their local realities, school leaders engage with policy tactically. In Australia, in a study that investigated how leadership contributes to ‘outstanding educational outcomes’ in schools, Dinham (2005) found that effective principals innovatively negotiate with systemic expectations such as policies and regulations; and those ‘informed risk takers’ are more likely to ask “‘forgiveness than permission” (Dinham, 2005, p.345). What Thomson (2010), Dinham (2005) and Gunter and Forrester (2009) provide are stances that resonate with tactics of engagement we highlight above. However, their analysis does not offer a nuance account of the interplay between positions and position-takings of school leaders in policy implementation. Likewise, in showing how context mediates policy enactment, Ball et al (2012) do not distinguish between different kinds of policy practices by differently positioned head-teachers. We extend this existing work by showing the interaction of positions (contexts) and position-takings (stances) in equity policy implementation in schools. In this section, we briefly discuss the interactions between how head-teachers are contextually positioned and the stances available to them, and how these are differently experienced by head-teachers of dis/advantaged schools in our study.

Table 1. Interactions between head-teachers’ position and stance in enacting policy in schools

Position: the influences of context	Stance: the tactics of engagement		
	<i>Compliance</i>	<i>Compromise</i>	<i>Contest</i>
<i>Resources</i>	Dean* (D**, Gov) Annette (D, Com) Tim (D, Com) Matthew (A, Gov)	Dean (D, Gov) Glenn (A, Ind) Deborah (A, Ind)	Vincent (A, Gov) Matthew (A, Gov)
<i>Institutional ethos</i>	Susan (A, Cath) Kathleen (D, Cath)	Kathleen (A, Cath) Tim (D, Com)	Vincent (A, Gov)
<i>Personal dispositions</i>	Deborah (A, Ind) Carolyn (A, Cath)	Carolyn (A, Cath)	Dean (D, Gov)

Notes: *In our study, some principals took more than one stance in their responses to the nationally prescribed equity agenda. **Abbreviated words in brackets represent school backgrounds: A=advantaged; D=disadvantaged; Cath= Catholic; Com= community; Gov= government; Ind=Independent.

In conceptualising our analysis, Table 1 is instructive regarding the policy stances (i.e. tactics of engagement) that are available to differently positioned principals. For example, consider the influence of *resources* on equity policy enactment. For principals of schools located in low socioeconomic areas, nationally prescribed equity agendas that are accompanied by funding are ‘*readerly policies*’ (Ball et al., 2011b, p.612); they tend to arrive in schools to be

implemented with little room for variation. Principals of such schools do not have the luxury to turn away funding. The tactic of engagement by such principals is thus compliance. However, for principals of advantaged schools, equity provisions that do not fit their institutional ethos or the dispositions of the leadership circle are '*writerly policies*' (Ball et al., 2011b, p.615). That is, principals of such schools have the financial luxury to creatively engage with them (compromise) or ignore them altogether (contest). In other words, the stance of contest is associated with relative autonomy of the school (mainly in terms of financial resources) from external demands, including equity policy prescriptions of the government. In their account of Bourdieu's field theory, Hilgers and Mangez (2015) noted, "as autonomy increases, the refraction effect grows and the agents tend to divert, translate and interpret external phenomena in terms of the stakes, logics and beliefs specific to the field and the positions they occupy within it" (p.7). A head-teacher of an advantaged Catholic school made it clear that the school takes a stand in light of its own principles and priorities.

... a lot of social justice issues are informed by the [Catholic] Church as well. We would differ from a lot of the ways in which some of the policies have moved in more recent times ... We take that [government equity agenda] on-board, but at the end of the day we make decisions about whatever we think is best for our community at the time ... So I think in some instances, you have to make a stand, you have to. (Vincent, St Catherine's School for Girls)

It is also possible to read the positioning of principals from the stances they take (their tactics). Thus, for example, Dean (principal of a disadvantaged school) is personally disposed to challenge equity-related policies that do not conform to his social justice values and beliefs. Yet, the tactics of engagement he employs tend to be ones of compliance and compromise, in keeping with his disadvantaged school positioning. Whereas contest is a tactic primarily available to Vincent and Matthew (principals of advantaged schools), even when their own dispositions are not challenged by the values that inform government policy.

In some cases, although the school might not be strongly influenced by funding conditions associated with government equity policies, because of an institutional ethos and the principal's personal disposition, advantaged schools can be seen to support national equity agendas. However, it is important to note that social justice dispositions may not always be visible in conversations. In their 'policy audit' in the UK, Ball *et al.* (2012) found that social justice values were not explicit in interviews with teachers and head teachers, which they partly attributed to the implicitness of social justice in the prevalent neoliberal education policy discourse. Invisibility of social justice values in interviews may also be aligned with the fact that belief systems are developed over time and function "below the level of consciousness and language" (Swartz, 1997, p. 105). The implication is that principals should be confronted with real life problems that create disjuncture and trigger reflexivity, leading to 'awakening of consciousness' (Bourdieu, 1990a) in the form of questioning assumptions and beliefs underpinning one's practices (see also Author 2017).

Our key argument is that, in enacting policy, the positioning and position-taking of key actors are critical factors. Ball et al. (2012) see policy enactment as a creative process that involves "the translation of texts into action and the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices" (p.3). The notion of doing policy directs attention away from what governments say they will do (as represented in policy pronouncements) to what actors in the field of practice (e.g. principals) *actually* do regarding the policy issues in question. In this regard, positions provide agents with a distinctive space from which they negotiate their roles and

tactics. The stances that principals take in relation to the implementation of specific policy provisions are a function of institutional contexts and their personal dispositions. There are often occasions in which the disposition of policy actors such as principals “steps in to fill the gaps in the regulations” (Bourdieu, 2003, p.131). The position of a principal is also defined by institutional financial resources (economic capital) and historical background, heritage and leadership skills and experiences (cultural capital) as well as by the principal’s networks of influence (social capital), legitimate leadership authority (symbolic capital) and subjective dispositions that function as schemes of perception and action.

Conclusion

It is evident in our research that principals engage in situated interpretation. Their translation of policy into practice means that context is a valuable analytic device to understand and problematize mismatches between policy intention and policy impact. Our study shows that the degree of engagement with equity-related policies varies depending on the *resources* (e.g. the socioeconomic background of schools and the availability of funding associated with specific equity policy provisions), the *institutional ethos* informing school practices, and the *personal dispositions* of school leaders. We also showed how positions and dispositions of head-teachers inform their stances of compliance, compromise or contest in their engagement with equity policies.

Policy texts “cannot simply be *implemented!* They have to be translated from text to action – put ‘into’ practice – in relation to history and to context, with the resources available” (Ball et al., 2012, p.3, emphasis in original). In this paper, drawing on Bourdieu’s theory of practice and with experiences of head-teachers as an illustrative empirical case, we showed that school context mediates equity policy enactment by way of defining positions and stances of policy actors. Differences in the logic of policy engagement that operates across schools of different sectoral and socio-economic status highlight how context shapes the positioning of agents. In short, our research suggests that the full range of tactics of engagement with policy are not available to all principals, even when their personal dispositions might suggest other ways of interpreting and translating policy. *The readerly policies of some are the writerly policies of others, differently positioned.* Of most concern is that it is principals of disadvantaged schools who appear to be most constrained. There are clear implications here for the translation of equity policy (in particular) into practice. That is, equity provisions tend to be enacted from positions of advantage, running counter to the basic premise of distributive justice, which prioritises the standpoint of the least advantaged (Connell, 1992). This too needs to be added to the agenda of national equity policy if its enactment by principals is also to be equitable.

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[To be included in the final version of the paper]

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