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**Educational Leadership for Transformational Sustainability:  
A critical case study of pedagogy at a Western Australian public  
primary school**

**Eva Dobozy, Ph. D.**

Edith Cowan University  
Perth, Western Australia

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**Address for Correspondence:**

Dr Eva Dobozy  
Lecturer in Education Studies  
Bachelor of Education  
Kindergarten through Primary Education  
School of Education  
Edith Cowan University  
Joondalup Campus  
100 Joondalup Drive  
Joondalup WA 6027  
Tel: 6304 5080  
Fax: 6304 5850  
Email: [e.dobozy@ecu.edu.au](mailto:e.dobozy@ecu.edu.au)

### **Abstract**

*In this paper, I aim to extend the boundaries of what is understood about widespread and lasting school improvement. I argue that the educational reform at the school level is minimal and may even be detrimental for students' learning outcomes if it is not sustainable beyond the current leadership team. What is the effect of innovative school reform on children's lives and educational success if structures are not in place to sustain it? How can worthwhile innovative pedagogical practices be maintained? For this discussion some innovative pedagogical practices at a primary school located in a low socio-economic area of Perth are explored. The data are drawn from a recent case study, which investigated the characteristics of democratic schools. The findings suggest that current primary government school leadership team appointments in Western Australia do not cater for seamless transition from one leadership team (or principal) to the next. Thus many school reform practices do not move beyond the implementation phase and consequently have minimal transformative effects. I argue that to maximise the capacity of 'systems thinkers in action' (Fullan, 2005) that work for more socially just and sustainable reform efforts in education and promote 'practices of pedagogy that work against systems of oppression' (Lather, 1991a), the shortcomings of current leadership appointment practices in the Western Australian government school system need to be problematised and possible solutions offered.*

### Introduction

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Pedagogical reform efforts by school-based leaders or leadership teams are, in many OECD countries, at the forefront of national and international debates and policy development initiatives. Nonetheless, the sustainability and long-term effects of school-based pedagogical reform efforts do not seem to get much attention. This paper tackles this issue by discussing an unexpected and disconcerting finding of a recent case study. The school at the centre of the discussion, Bolton Primary School, seemed to be an exemplar of innovative and potentially transformative leadership practices. However, the pedagogy introduced to the school did not seem to move beyond the implementation phase. The data gathered for a recent case study of democratic educational practices was re-examined to consider the effects of constant and fundamental change in philosophy and practice at this particular school. The central aim of the present discussion is to make apparent the current paradoxical situation. Innovative school leadership is sought and needed in Western Australian government schools. The question is: What happens if an innovative school leader who succeeded in substantially changing the culture and educational practices of a school decides to leave the school? The principal's agenda at Bolton Primary School was to change outdated educational practices at this public primary school, which was situated in a low socio-economic area of Perth. His aim was to bring pedagogical practices closer to those he experienced at

his former school, which was a private alternative school serving a well-educated and professional clientele.

It was the unexpected departure of the principal and his leadership team at Bolton Primary during the initial study of democratic educational practices that prompted the re-examination of the data. After the leadership team moved on to other appointments, the reform practices were dismantled and traditional educational pedagogy was reinstated.

First, I offer some background information about the wider study that examined the relationship between pedagogy and effective civic learning in four case study schools. Second, I advance the discussion to establish the need for a re-examination of educational practices at Bolton Primary School. Here, the 'educational disadvantage' of Bolton Primary School is explored in some detail. Third, an illustration of micro-practices of everyday life at Bolton Primary School is offered. The field data was collected as part of the wider study into democratic educational practices. This illustration is followed by a critical examination of the effects of the innovative change practices on children's lives and learning outcomes. Finally, the problem of sustainable transformation is explored and the question is posed: Is innovative leadership harmful to 'educationally disadvantaged' students?

### The Democratic Schools Project

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#### ***Background to the study***

The findings reported here are derived from a re-examination of data from an earlier study<sup>3</sup> that was designed to examine the interrelationship between democratic educational practices and socio-political literacy, a mix between citizenship and values education. The earlier study was set in the Western Australian education system and centred on the question of how four primary schools could actively foster conditions conducive to creating and sustaining education *in* and *for* democracy and human rights. Researching the potential effect of pedagogy on the development of civic proficiency and democratic values was seen as important, especially in the light of growing 'civic

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<sup>3</sup> The study was my PhD research. The original thesis title was: Education in and for Democracy and Human Rights: Moving from Utopian Ideals to Grounded Practice. Here I refer to it as the 'democratic schools project'.

apathy' among young Australians. The school leaders in the four schools were experimenting with innovative pedagogical practices and the democratic schools project aimed to investigate the effects thereof for civics and citizenship education.

In contrast to traditional approaches to citizenship education that tend to focus on the operational aspects of representative governments, institutions and history, this study focused on pedagogy. A central argument was that education *for* democracy and human rights could be effectively achieved through the fostering of democracy and human rights *in* education. To highlight the close relationship between citizenship education and values education, the study drew on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The over-riding concern when selecting target schools was that they had a reputation for being democratic in nature. Multiple field strategies were used to gather data on the experiences. School policy documents from two consecutive years were collected and analysed. Detailed, non-participant observations were made and field notes written on all school visits. Two separate interviews were conducted with the principals and in each school, a survey questionnaire was administered to two classroom teachers and their students that were identified by the principal as 'exemplary' in the translation of policy. The interviews were partially transcribed and the interview and survey data analysed together with the document and observation data. Meaning was constructed using a constant comparative method of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A core finding of the study was that the four case study schools, although very different in their composition, were led by principals who shared the view that children under their care were subjects with increasing rights and responsibilities rather than objects to be manipulated, controlled and protected. Some other findings suggested that experiencing democracy and human rights in daily school life in a variety of situations and on a number of different levels can effectively contribute to the learning of the meaning and advantages of democratic values, such as the rule of law, participatory decision-making and due process (Dobozy, 2003, 2004). These schools were seen to engage in the teaching and learning of 'active citizenship', in the sense that their students seemed to have been granted opportunities to practice civic rights and freedoms as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 12, 13 and 15) and were given some form of agency (United Nations, 2001).

The school principals participating in the study appeared to have embraced the notion that schools themselves need to become more democratic to effectively educate tomorrow's citizens adequately in acquiring necessary attitudes and skills to function

successfully and to appreciate our democratic system of government. The schools all shared a particular feature: a changed child-image held by principals. The democratic schools project provided evidence that a non-traditional child-image paved the way for the innovative and potentially transformative educational practices that were responsible for the schools' reputation of being 'democratic schools' (Dobozy, 2005). The examples presented in the study illustrated that participating principals acknowledged children as bearers of rights. However, the children also needed to develop an understanding that these rights brought with them corresponding responsibilities. Thus, the children's learning about democratic values of respect towards themselves, others and society as a whole was carefully facilitated. This paper focuses on a sub-set of these experiences, re-examining the events at one particular school, Bolton Primary School.

### Re-Engaging the Dis-Engaged

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Here I would like to build on the background account of the previous research and explore the effects of school reform practices on children's lives and learning outcomes. The findings of the 'democratic schools project' (Dobozy, 2004) suggest that by experiencing democracy and human rights in their schools, in a variety of situations and on a number of levels (whole school and classroom), students learn to value education as a means for success in later life. Building on the findings of the previous study, the innovative pedagogical practices at Bolton Primary School are re-examined and the potential effects of educational reform on socially and educationally disadvantaged children's lives and learning outcomes are problematised. A deliberate focus is placed on the case study school with the lowest SES score.

The present discussion, which is framed around the re-examination of the field data from the one school participating in the democratic schools project, will powerfully illustrate that children from disadvantaged backgrounds seem to be greatly affected by innovative school reform practices. Changing school cultures and educational practices may bring about hope for more responsive and socially just day-to-day practices. This may result in motivating educationally disadvantaged children to perceive education as increasingly relevant to their lives. These children may start to develop social and political literacy and experience increasing academic and social success. However, innovative pedagogical practices can also have possible negative effects. This is

especially true in cases where the outgoing principal's educational philosophy is diametrically opposed to that of the incoming principal. Hammersley-Fletcher & Brundrett (2005) aptly note: "Leadership is, at least in part, about the underlying philosophies and rationales upon which education and school practice is based and these values also have a bearing on the style of leadership preferred (p. 62)."

As mentioned above, Bolton's principal, Ben, had worked in progressive and independent schools for a number of years before taking up the principalship at Bolton Primary School. He was committed to introducing some of the organisational benefits experienced by children from more affluent backgrounds in independent schools. One of the operational structures that Ben introduced to Bolton Primary School was a new leadership style. As Ben explained: *"We have full consultation. My style of leadership is leading from the back rather than the front. I prefer that every decision that is made is a whole-school decision"*(Principal Interview). He noted that Bolton Primary School had changed considerably since his arrival and that *"[together] we came up with what we feel are major changes"* to the governing structure of the school, which previously had *"very rigid structures"* built around *"surveillance and control of students"* (Principal Interview). These statements indicate that Ben introducing more flexible power structures where decisions were negotiated and power was shared. This depicts the model of leadership described by Hammersley-Fletcher & Brundrett (2005) as:

[Principals] ... talk favourably about models of leadership which involve all staff in collaborating on and discussing school development and many believe in delegating responsibilities where everyone has some opportunity to demonstrate leadership and to develop leadership skills. For [principals] this involves them in having the courage to share or hand over aspects of their responsibility to others. (p. 73)

### Profiling 'Educational Disadvantage'

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It has long been known that the chances of success at school are heavily influenced by circumstances at home – and in particular by parental education, occupation, and economic status.

UNICEF, 2002, p. 19

The Howard government's 'SES index' (Kemp, 1999) is used to establish the level of Commonwealth education funding per student. This approach to assessing a school's socio-economic status (SES) took effect in 2001 and assesses students' SES by connecting their addresses with current Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census

data (Kemp, 1999). A school's SES score is established by indexing household income, education and occupation of parents, which ranges from 85 to 130. The less well educated and affluent the parent base at a particular school is, the lower a school's SES rating. Equally, the higher a school's SES score, the better educated and more affluent is its parent base. Table 1 summarises the characteristics of Bolton Primary School, its size, location, parent base and SES score. It also illustrates poignantly what the profile of 'educationally disadvantaged' children is by positioning this school at the absolute bottom of possible ranking.

**Table 1: The Characteristics of Bolton Primary School**

Name*	Location	Type	Size	Social Class	SES Score
Bolton Primary School	underprivileged area of Perth	government school	small to medium, app. 260 students	working class (mainly unskilled labour or unemployed)	85

\* All names of persons at the school and the school's name are pseudonyms.

Bolton Primary School can be classified as a small government school, which is located in one of a number of underprivileged areas of Perth, Western Australia. The suburb is marked by high unemployment and houses a large and diverse ethnic community, which contributes to a number of social and cultural problems. The people living in this suburb are mostly poorly educated. The school's SES score of 85 reflects these socio-cultural attributes.

#### Marked by Inscription of Poverty

The Bolton Primary School is a small government school that at the time of the study provided education for approximately 260 students ranging in age from five to 12 years. The school had a staff of 20 members. The school can be described as a difficult site that reflects the many social injustices and inequalities that are the reality of many large cities in established democracies. The systems of inequality are manifold, powerful and ever-present within as well as outside of the school as it is located in one of the most underprivileged areas of Perth, Western Australia. Indeed, it cannot be

denied that the Bolton Primary School, its culture and physical appearance, is marked by the inscription of poverty. The principal's description of the community and the school's context illustrates this poignantly. Ben explained that:

*You see, the children in this local community are so disempowered ... this school is the most disadvantaged school in Western Australia. We have over 30 different nationalities represented at this school. Most of our parents . . . rent [government-subsidised] housing. ... about 60% of our students are from single parent families and . . . about 60% or 70% of our parents are unemployed and are relying on social [welfare] as their main source of income. But our main issue is the transition of children. We've got children currently enrolled and we are their fourth school this year. We've 160 students who transferred out of the school and 130 students who transferred into the school. Not only do they [the children] have to get used to living in a new suburb and new housing, they have to get used to a new school, make new friends and a new set of rules in the school. When you're six, seven or eight years old, that transition is difficult to make. (Principal Interview)*

In the above interview extract Ben described the social context of the school by referring to the parents' social class. The compounding processes of bodily/social inscriptions mentioned by Ben, such as '30 different nationalities', 'transferring into and out of the school', 'living in government housing and on social welfare' are not faced by the majority of Western Australian students and, thus, are often not only not catered for, but just simply forgotten by politicians and educational policy designers who are charged with looking after the educational development and welfare of Western Australian school children. The disadvantages 'poor children' face, based on the economic position of their parents, cannot be hidden or erased. At the time of the study, Ben had been the principal of the Bolton Primary School for three years. The experiences of working in alternative educational systems helped to shape Ben's ideas about the purpose of education and his educational philosophy in general. He seemed determined to introduce major changes to the learning environment.

### ***The School's Physical Environment***

The first thing that one noticed when entering the Bolton School grounds was the massive school gate, and the three metre high fence with three strings of barbed wire on top all the way around. Discussing the school's physical environment, Ben noted that: *"We had the [former] Minister of Education visiting the school last week and he just couldn't believe that a school would look like this"* (Principal Interview). The school was built in the 1970s and the buildings looked generally old and run-down, although the majority of buildings had been repainted in light cream and blue colours.

The school got vandalised regularly. It was not uncommon for students to paint graffiti all over the walls of the classrooms and smash or scratch windows.

The school seemed to resemble a prison, with its high fence and the way it was built. When I was conveying my observation to Ben he nodded and explained:

*It does, it's all about surveillance and control. You can stand in the front office there and you can basically observe everything that is happening out in the playground ... I'm not even sure if teachers understand [the implications of] that. ... Foucault would have a field day here (laughing). (Principal Interview)*

The school buildings had been placed strategically so that the staff were able to observe everyone and everything in the playground, without being seen to observe the students. The architecture of this school reflects an ideology that views students as 'objects' in need of constant surveillance and control.

The physical environment must be viewed as an important political space. What this means is that the physical space underpins the surveillance of students and is the first effective tool of social control. In this sense, the architectural and physical landscapes of a school are important when discussing educational change practices.

### Changing Micro-Practices of Everyday Life

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The change practices introduced to the school by Ben were intended to make Bolton Primary a more democratic school. A 'democratic school' is a school in which human rights of all are valued and upheld as set out in the Western Australian Curriculum Framework's Core Shared Values section (Curriculum Council, 2001). Three major innovative pedagogical changes introduced to Bolton Primary are described and their potential effects on children's lives and learning outcomes analysed: a) differential treatment of children, b) a right to reply, and c) in-school suspension (scrapping of the time-out room, referred to at the school as the 'resolution room').

#### ***Change Practices in Action: Differential Treatment of Children***

Ben introduced his idea of 'differential treatment of children' right at the start of the interview.

*Eva: So the children are not treated the same?*

*Ben: That's right. I might have a child that breaks some windows, smashes a window and I might, rather than suspend the child, I will, if she or he is an Aboriginal student, then I would wait until they cool down and then work out what the issue is. If it was a Vietnamese child, I'd do the same*

*and with the Vietnamese child it might have something to do with the school, with the Aboriginal child it may have something to do with home – it usually has something to do with home. And therefore, suspending the Aboriginal child for smashing the window when it's a big issue at home (suspending means sending them home again to the situation that's made them angry in the first place) so I wouldn't suspend them when I find out what their problem is. I know that this causes problems as far as consistency but you know ...*

*Eva: So racial issues?*

*Ben: Yes, racial, lack of understanding of the student's background and culture. Rather than having to deal with the teacher, they [the students] can deal with me. They can come and talk to me and I go back and deal with the teacher on their behalf. That's a subtle thing that's happening that is not up front but it's happening where the kids can walk right in through this door. They have the right to come in and tell me. And that's working really well with those kids and I have about 6 or 7 kids, it's a flexible number.*

*Eva: What about the other children. Do they feel disadvantaged because these kids seem to have some rights that they don't have?*

*Ben: Well, certainly some of the other kids are much more empowered. They are more at ease with teachers and other students and often teachers are more willing to deal with an angry white student than with a let's say Ethiopian or Aboriginal student. I also point out that our school may be different from other schools.*

It is of particular significance to the present discussion that differential treatment practices were discussed at the start of the interview. Inscriptions of poverty as social and political pathology leave a trail of disempowerment and disenfranchised children. The above dialogue illustrates Ben's awareness of unequal power structures in society and his willingness to do something about it. By introducing the practice of 'giving special rights to a special group of children (Aboriginal children)', Ben aimed to problematise the ways in which social and political disadvantage is manifested, perpetuated and at times reinforced through day-to-day practices.

Traditional educational practices and the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to behaviour management is a relic from the Industrial Age, and conveys a similar philosophy as the original building plans of the school. In such schools, children are objects of power and seen to be in need of control and surveillance. They are generally still educated in 'batches, like cookies' (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990, p. 249). Ben seemed critical of this traditional view of children and his actions displayed a willingness to challenge pedagogical practices at the school. Ben's critical stands towards the hierarchical factory model of education that he found operating at Bolton Primary School was made explicit with the following comment: "*We are a factory, we are running an institution where all kids are the same. You are not allowed to be an individual, you're not allowed to be different*" (Principal-Interview). Equally visible

was his strong desire to change the culture of the school to make it more student-friendly, student-centered and empowering. Ben contends:

*But I've eased off on uniforms since I've been principal here. ... So we are very tolerant but we still encourage the kids to wear the school colours that are blue. It doesn't matter what they wear. (Principal interview)*

### ***Change Practices in Action: A Right to Reply***

These students and parents were not used to being consulted in school-intern organisational matters. Rather, they had had ample experience with government departments and agencies that adopt 'top-down' approaches, where people are told what to do and how to do it. While Bolton Primary School was a rather troubled site in many ways, the serious engagement with what Ben termed "*democratic reform in the student body*" was very encouraging indeed. A distinctive sign that the school was shifting its focus from student misbehaviour to positive attitudes in students, staff, and parents was the careful wording of the 'behaviour policy' as noted in the School Handbook: "The policy aims to develop skills, attitudes and self discipline which will result in a safe and caring environment for the whole school community" (Bolton Primary School, Handbook, 2001, p. 7). The implicit aim seemed to be the development of ethical and responsible behaviours, the creation of a safe environment and compassionate relationships. Despite this aspiration for the school, more challenges had to be overcome before its realisation was possible. Ben explained that several teachers were visibly committed to enabling students to voice their opinions and change the culture at the school. However, a significant number of teachers wanted to preserve the 'status quo' and were content with the way the school had been operating. Thus, they actively or passively resisted the collaborative effort between school administration, teacher representatives and through student and parent consultation. As Ben explained:

*We are going through staff changes at the moment. We actually encourage teachers who have fixed ideas about how they would like the school to be, to transfer to another school, if they're not happy with the change. We are having a good rate of success with that and are getting some good, flexible teachers in that they are prepared to hand over some of the authority and power to the students but it's ... we are three years down the track and we are finding that it's not an easy process. (Principal Interview)*

Ben's observations pointed to resistance to his democratisation efforts. Authority figures, such as teachers may struggle with feelings of disempowerment themselves when they are challenged to examine longstanding beliefs about their authority and status in the classroom and the need to control and manage students in traditional ways. It was outside the scope of this study to investigate teachers' feelings of

disempowerment as principals, such as Ben, pursued their ideas of student empowerment. Nevertheless, this is an important issue that is worthy of further investigation. What was happening within the school that seemed to make a real difference to the lives of these students? The following extract provides another snapshot of how Ben was able to change the culture of the school.

*Eva: How committed are you to democratic principles within the school, given the rather difficult circumstances?*

*Ben: We are changing. When I first came to the school three years ago, we had a very rigid structure certainly as far as discipline and school rules were concerned and the level of misbehaviour and suspension from the school were rising and also rising with that was parent dissatisfaction with what was happening within the school.*

*I was the principal of X and Y [two alternative schools]. I really liked the principles of the alternative schools, of students being empowered and also parents involved in decision-making and the life of the school. I am trying to implement a number of those principles into this setting here but a large number of teachers and some parents feel really threatened by that because it's just something they have no experience of and they just can't imagine students having power within the school, you know, it's the teachers who have the power. So my experience in the alternative school system has been to have very few issues to do with behaviour in the playground also the classroom. That's what I'm trying to change here. Where a child gets into trouble for not following one of the codes of behaviour, then they basically have the right of reply and some participation in resolving the issue.*

After listening to Ben's explanations, I began to form the view that his general philosophical approach was child-centred and grounded in his educational experiences. Ben seemed convinced that there existed a definite correlation between student empowerment and fewer behavioural problems.

Changing the terminology from 'school rules' to 'code of behaviour' seemed significant as it implied that students should behave ethically and take responsibility for their own actions. In particular it encouraged students to view themselves as subjects, active agents who were able to make choices, and have a voice. So, by listening to students and acting on their wishes, Ben intended to signal a radical reconceptualisation and reconstitution of the students and teachers at the school. He intended to make visible the challenge of the 'status quo'. The newly introduced concept of 'having a right to reply' was, thus, the signaling of a paradigmatic shift in the culture at the school from perceptions of students as 'objects of surveillance and control' to 'subjects with rights and responsibilities'.

***Change practices in action: In-school suspension practices or the scrapping of the 'resolution room'***

The change to in-school suspension or the scrapping of 'the resolution room', where the students *"were sat down in this room facing the wall, away from each other"* (Principal Interview) is an example of how the school's culture underwent significant changes, as not only teachers and parents but also students were included in the consultation process. Student views were being canvassed and their concerns taken into account when deciding about possible new and innovative avenues of action. Together the whole school community was, maybe for the first time in its existence, searching for a more desirable school discipline policy.

*Eva: Returning to the issue of student discipline, the kids decided that they didn't want a resolution room. So, how did they do that?*

*Ben: We had called all the kids together, that's from Years five to seven in a group meeting. ... So what we did is, we discussed it with the kids and they said they hated the system.*

*Eva: So what happened to this room? Is it still in existence?*

*Ben: The room has been scrapped and immediately the behaviour at school improved just with the scrapping of this system.*

*Eva: How did you measure this?*

*Ben: Well, number one was suspension data. Basically it came down straight away. ... We completely turned that around. We implemented some programs that empowered the students into resolving the issues that were happening out in the playground. Under this old system which a lot of schools call "MSB" [Managing Student Behaviour], the behaviour in the playground was terrible, because the teachers were looking for confrontations all the time and this sort of rubbed off on the students ... and the problem with that is that the focus was on looking for kids misbehaving and writing it in the book, their misbehaviour, but not resolving a situation with a student. ... Nothing was ever resolved and as soon as we got rid of that resolution room, the behaviour in the playground was amazing.*

*But what we did once the senior students actually had a new code of behaviour, they then took it and presented it to the other students in the school. So they went to each classroom and discussed it. So the student counselors took the code of behaviour to each classroom and discussed it with the other kids rather than the teacher doing it.*

Students were invited to a meeting and were given an opportunity to express their views. This is an example of the implementation of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2001). Arguably, changes to the discipline policy that were informed by constructivist views of children as social agents were seen as the causes of a reduction in student suspension. The shift in focus away from recording student 'misbehaviour', where teachers thought that it was their duty to 'look for and record rule-breaking all the time', was perceived as an enfranchisement. It

invited students to reflect on their situation and search for possible solutions to their problems with peers and/or teachers. Under the old disciplinary system at Bolton Primary School, the teachers would *"look for kids misbehaving and write it in the book"* (*Principal Interview*) for the principal or deputy principal to deal with the disobedient child at a later stage, rather than *"resolving a situation with a student"* (*Principal Interview*). Fully aware that *"dealing with students' misbehaviour"* (*Principal Interview*), presupposes a willingness of teachers to take on a leadership role with additional responsibilities, Ben acknowledged that some teachers were simply not interested in taking on more responsibility, which presented a clear stumbling block in his effort to democratise the school. Nevertheless, there were enough teachers and students at Bolton Primary School that were willing to share in Ben's vision and worked towards a more democratic governing structure to effect change to the school culture. The students in grades five to seven were 10 to 12 years old. Ben explained that it was a very new experience for these students to be called together and asked what they *"[felt] about the school rules"* (*Principal Interview*), as these children were used to being told what to do rather than invited to voice their opinions about the purpose and usefulness of existing rules and regulations.

The practices of consultation and shared problem-solving emphasises student agency, where notions of passivity, even if only marginally or temporarily, are superseded. This example illustrates how the students at Bolton Primary School were no longer the passive recipients of adults' decisions but instead, they were given the right to be involved in decision-making processes about the governing structure of the school. Ben, through the pedagogical changes he introduced, advocated the idea of greater student participation in decision-making processes. In particular, observing school practices under his leadership, I gained the impression that he attempted to build awareness in staff that listening to student concerns not only benefits the students and addresses their evolving capacities to develop democratic skills and helped re-engage them with their education, but more so helped the school to change its culture and be more successful. The effects of specific behaviour management practices were discussed and as a result, the 'resolution room', as a technology of social control to 'normalise' student behaviour, lost its power as alternative practices were explored and implemented. The 'scrapping of the resolution room' was welcomed by the majority of teachers and students, although for different reasons. Document analysis and interview data made evident that a great number of children were regularly sent to the resolution

room for 'rehabilitation'. That the 'resolution room' was not particularly popular with students. However, teachers also dreaded it as it did not seem to effect much change in behaviour in students and added to teachers' workload. Teachers were required to give up their lunch, recess or DOT time to supervise students in the resolution room to ensure that they were not talking, reading or playing and facing the wall at all times. Thus, the 'resolution room' was not just unpopular with students and teachers, it proved to be unsuccessful as well, otherwise the steady stream of 'offending students' would have decreased over the years. The 'scrapping of the resolution room' as a pedagogical practice exemplifies how underlying values of respect for oneself and others are translated into actions which lead to a less formal power structure. The resulting student behaviour management plan reflected the valuing of students as social agents with rights and responsibilities and allowed for a more fluid and interactive power relationship between adults and students.

#### The Effects of a New and Innovative Leadership Style

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The significance of the re-examining of the data is its illustration of how Ben seemed able to exemplify a breed of 'new and innovative school leadership'. This new breed of school leaders seemed to have a changed child-image, which enabled them to find strategies that informed the empowerment of students at their schools at least some of the time and helped students claim their rights to participate in decision-making processes. This leadership style seemed to have direct consequences for student's lived experiences at schools and also for their learning outcomes. Ben reported that during his time as a school leader at Bolton Primary School, suspension rates kept dropping and disengaged, disenfranchised youth started re-engaging with the teachers and each other. Consequently, fewer students refused to follow teacher's directions or interfered with equipment or each other. Increasingly, these previously disengaged and disenfranchised students started re-engaging and were able to experience what it meant to 'be heard', to 'have a voice' and to 'take responsibility for their own actions'.

The shift in perception of students from 'objects to be acted upon' to that of 'subjects to take action' can be seen as 'revolutionary' in this socio-political environment. The above examples are illustrative of Ben's struggle to enfranchise students as subjects in the making, with increasing rights and responsibilities, rather than objects to be manipulated, controlled and protected. Ben's struggle was, however,

tempered by the fragile state of many of his students as children constituted by economic and socio-political inequality. Nevertheless, it seemed that the non-traditional 'child-image' was shared by other authority figures within the school and was thus slowly becoming embedded in the social fabric of the school through the implementation of, for example, a school 'code of behaviour', an acceptance of 'differential treatment practices' and the change of in-school suspension. Democratic consultation and deliberation that were practiced in this school under Ben's leadership were illustrative of the number of ways in which day-to-day educational practices effectively can contribute to more enfranchised students, who are willing to engage and 'giving education another go'. The practices of student consultation and shared problem-solving emphasised student agency, rather than passivity. Therefore, the sentence: "*So what we did is, we discussed it with the kids*" (*Principal Interview*) becomes a sentence of central importance, as it signals a powerful transformation in the conception of the child-image at this school where children "are seen as *meaning-makers*, as essentially actors and not just as reactors" (Verhellen, 2000a, p. 22) (emphasis in original).

Although not necessarily seen as equal partners, these students, possibly for the first time in their lives, were seen *as partners*; therefore they were seen as subjects with rights and responsibilities and as governors of their and other's lives, rather than objects to be acted upon. Unfortunately, new culture and status quo at the school was suddenly jeopardised with Ben's announcement of his intention to leave the school and his subsequent departure.

It is almost inevitable that with the arrival of a new administration, a new set of values and a corresponding set of rules are established at a school. Often, this renewal process can be of advantage to a community as a fresh gaze is bestowed upon an established learning environment, its physical appearance, culture and pedagogical processes. The scrutiny of operational and educational practices by a new set of administrators can be of great advantage in reviewing pedagogical innovation.

However, under the current system, the incoming leadership team appointed to Bolton Primary School was not aware that the school was involved in a research project. Further, there did not seem to be any awareness of recent pedagogical change practices that were successfully implemented (Telephone interview with the newly appointed deputy-principal). Consequently, what could have been a value-adding enterprise for the school and the children came suddenly to a halt.

## Sustainable Transformation in Jeopardy

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After four years at Bolton Primary Schools, Ben moved on to a different position where he thought he could serve underprivileged students, many of them of Aboriginal descent, even better. The deputy-principal and the registrar moved on to a different appointments, which left this 'hard to staff' school (Department of Education and Training, 2006) with no administrative staff involved in the change process. Generally, government school principals are appointed by the Western Australian Education Department. This means that Ben's successor was chosen by administrators at the state department level. Consequently, the students, parents and teachers at Bolton Primary School had no influence in the appointment of a new leader. Neither was Ben, as the resigning principal of Bolton Primary School, de-briefed about the operational and pedagogical changes he initiated, their successes and motives. Thus, the new principal (or leadership-team) was unaware of the school's latest initiatives and successes in implementing innovative new programs<sup>4</sup>.

Since Ben's departure from the school, it had *"two complete sets of administrators (principal and deputy-principal) with their own ideas and practices"* (Telephone-Interview with Barbara, the newly appointed deputy-principal). Barbara explained that schools like Bolton Primary School are 'hard to fill places' and she is also only there until the end of the term when a replacement will take over as acting deputy until the position of principal, deputy-principal and registrar can be filled permanently. Being appointed at the school 'short-term', Barbara was not aware of the school's involvement in the research project, nor did she know Ben or his educational ideas and the background of the changes that he implemented while principal at Bolton Primary School.

The new administration (principal and deputy-principal) was not aware of Ben's changes to the school's disciplinary policy nor were they aware of his educational aims and aspirations. The centralised school appointment practice makes it unusually hard for individual schools, such as Bolton Primary School, to develop consistency of culture

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<sup>4</sup> By contrast, resigning principals of some small independent schools, such as Montessori schools, are replaced by long-serving teachers from each of the respective schools who are familiar with the culture, history, governing structure, latest initiatives and policy changes at the school. Often, the appointments of the new principals at these schools occur after extensive consultation with staff, parents and sometimes even students (Dobozy, 2004).

and can even, as in the present example, nullify the changes implemented at the school. Furthermore, for students to acquire a sense of security and autonomy seems almost impossible in a climate of constant change of educational and administrative staff, with vastly differing pedagogical views, and a lack of effective communication between retiring and new school administration. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that, after Ben's departure, the major changes he instigated were discontinued. A poignant example of this was Ben's attempt implement new pedagogical processes that contributed to a decrease of behavioural problems and fewer student suspensions. Since the departure of Ben and his deputy-principal, the new administration reinstated the old system, although in a different form. The resolution room was re-instated as the 'interview-room' and, according to Barbara, the acting deputy principal, "*it works well, because the students hate it*" (Telephone interview).

The belief in the need for and effectiveness of policies and practices that attempt to 'normalise' student behaviours at the school, exemplifies the tendency for inscriptions of poverty to be translated into social and moral pathology. All students, even the 'non-deviant students', are affected by the reinstallation of the 'resolution room', now referred to as the 'interview-room', as the students that escaped being assigned to the 'interview room' were expected to 'watch and learn', similar to the 'public spectacle' described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Thus, the 'interview room' functions as a public display of power on the bodies of 'misbehaving' students to discipline their minds, through a change of attitude. Barbara (the new deputy principal) seems to approve of the 'interview-room' in a school that caters for socially disadvantaged students, precisely because it is used as a 'deterrent', "*something to hate*", much the same way as the 'resolution room' was despised and functioned as a so-called deterrent prior to Ben's regime at the school. Recent developments at Bolton Primary School beg the following questions: What is the effect of innovative school reform on children's lives and educational success if structures are not in place to sustain it? Is it possible that innovations such as those implemented by Ben may do more than good by instilling a sense of hope and agency that is so easily taken away again?

The drawbacks of a centralised system, where principals and deputy-principals of government schools are sent to a new appointment at the beginning of a school year or term without much knowledge and understanding of the school, its history or recent educational developments, and without knowledge of the educational initiative of

parting principals, makes sustainable transformative educational practices extraordinarily hard.

### Is Innovative Leadership Harmful to 'Disadvantaged' Students?

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Ben offered a bold, new leadership style and pedagogical approaches, which were supported by a constructivist philosophy and a changed child-image. Whilst Ben's ideas and educational practices were new, they were grounded in values that stemmed from the early beginnings of western scientific thought: offering opportunity to all, building strong communities, creating open and fair governing structures, and promoting a more just and secure teaching and learning environment. Thus, sharing in Ben's ideas did not seem to be an obstacle. What these ideas meant for norm setting in a school such as Bolton Primary School and how his specific ideas were translated into practice, is something that is widely contested. I argue that in many schools and classrooms, student's participation rights as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 14) are not yet taken seriously enough (United Nations, 2001). The attempt to give students 'a voice' and let them be part of the decision-making process concerning school governance issues invoked a sense of importance and urgency, encompassing principles of the ideal of democratic life, much the same way as democratic life has been envisioned in the past by theorists of democracy such as Plato, Locke, Rousseau, Paine and later on by the United Nations. It seems that one of the core human rights, the right to participation (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 14) at Bolton Primary School as a basis for democratic life, attempted to instill a sense of self that was connected to the school community in a positive way (United Nations, 2001). In other words, Ben seemed to believe that by embracing student's participation rights as a core principle of basic human rights, students would reaffirm and reevaluate who they were as individuals, but also as members of the school community. Thus, I conclude that through the valuing of 'the right to participation' democratic attitudes and beliefs are internalised by students, which is seen as a model that enhances the formation of 'good citizens'.

From hopelessness, to hope and back to hopelessness, what are the effects of innovative practices on these children? If we are serious in changing the lives of these children, and in letting them participate in economic and social successes, we need to enable them educational success. Following Fullan (2005), I argue that systems thinking

approaches are required to tackle this serious problem of dis-engaged children and youth. Great care needs to be taken that we do not add to this feeling of powerlessness by ‘scrapping resolution rooms’ and re-instating ‘interview rooms’ in schools that serve the economically and socially disadvantaged population, that supposedly ‘work well’ from a leadership perspective because they are ‘hated by students’. A carefully crafted mix of ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ approaches to school leadership, which provides parents and students the opportunities to contribute to philosophical and operational debates at the school, needs to replace ‘top down’ approaches which are relics of traditional schooling.

### Concluding Remarks

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Michael Foucault’s question: “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, ... and ... schools resemble prisons?” (cited in Horrocks & Jevitic, 2001, p. 118) needs to be taken seriously. A possible answer might be that it is not at all surprising that Foucault makes this observation given the historic development of western mass schooling. What might be surprising and is greatly unsettling is the fact that we still find schools in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia that operate with outdated models both in their physical appearance and cultural practices in areas that serve the underprivileged.

Renewal processes are often favorable to the community. However, at Bolton Primary School, which had undergone so much change in a relatively short timeframe, educational change practices may not add to the educational experiences of students at this school. With Ben’s arrival came a new set of democratic ideas and a changed child-image that were diametrically opposed to traditional educational principles and practices. They were accompanied by definite implementation practices and a passion for making the school more people-friendly. With his departure, the teachers and students experienced the return of traditional pedagogical policy and practice. How harmful are the effects of innovative practices that cannot be sustained at present? The re-establishment of the resolution room, now referred to as the ‘interview room’, illustrates powerfully how the underlying mechanisms of contemporary educational practices at Bolton Primary school are not only centred on the mind but also engage the body. Being apprehensive about externally controlling the bodies of the children, Ben discontinued the practices of external and formalised power over the minds of the children. His attempt to break the cycle of the production of passive and compliant

bodies makes the interplay between the control of the body and the mind<sup>5</sup>, especially significant. Bolton Primary School as an exemplar of innovative leadership practices was developing operational and pedagogical practices that led to fewer behavioural problems and lower student suspension rates. The reinstatement of punitive measures in the form of an 'interview room' re-established traditional views of these poor and educationally disadvantaged children as in need of control and correction. They are objectified again and may even be blamed for their 'unproductive behaviours' and minimal academic successes. Specific forms of surveillance and control result in specific forms of pedagogical practices.

In this paper I argued that practices of surveillance and social control have a direct influence on students' capacities to take part in decision-making processes on issues that affect them, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2001). The compounded vulnerability of students that are educated at Bolton Primary School cannot be denied. Thus, the tension between children's rights to protection and participation is made explicit. The dilemma present in this and similar schools is that children's rights to protection from "all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse" (Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child) seems clearly in the forefront of administrator's minds. The problem is that if children are perceived as primarily in need of protection (from themselves and outside influences), then these children become 'objects of protection'. They are the passive recipients of care based on adult perceptions of 'right and wrong' and adult decisions (to protect and correct). Or to put it differently, the balancing of the duty to protect children and the desire (and duty) to emancipate them from the role of the passive recipients of care and adult decision-making is not at all easy and there are no simple answers available.

The inherent tension between children's rights to protection and participation along with the overemphasis of children's protection rights can disadvantage socially and educationally disadvantaged students even more. The present discussion attempted to illustrate that there is a concern that these children are again objectified; this time, not primarily because of their status as children but their status as poor children. Inscriptions of poverty can be seen as the primary cause for the objectification of students as they are one of the most vulnerable groups in society and in desperate need

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<sup>5</sup> In his earlier work Foucault referred to the relationship between controlling the mind through the

of protection. The undeniable wish to protect students in situations of stress effectively renders mute any discussion of alternative possibilities. Thus, the obstacles to establishing a subject identity and the incorporation of children from poor economic backgrounds into the political culture is compounded, which may well make attempts to genuinely include these students in democratic participation if not unimaginable, very difficult indeed. Thus, there is a growing need to create spaces where the balance is shifted towards the realisation of students' participation rights in the governance of self and the community. Increasing administrator's aspirations to empower students of all ages and backgrounds lead to transformative educational practices, where student voices are included in decision-making processes and are thus only marginally objectified. Such pedagogy has the potential to bring a vast improvement in the lives of these students.

The shortcomings of current leadership appointments for government schools as practiced in Western Australia and elsewhere, especially for schools that service 'educationally disadvantaged' children, need to be addressed. There is an urgent need for further studies that are able to enhance our understanding of social and cultural reproduction in contemporary Australian schools that serve the underprivileged population. In this paper I have argued that future school improvement studies need to address the problem of maintaining innovative pedagogical practices after leadership teams have moved on. Awareness needs to be raised that innovative educational leadership practices may have detrimental effects on students' learning outcomes and may even contribute to greater disempowerment of students if innovation in schools that serve the 'educationally disadvantage population' is not sustained as infrastructures are not in place to secure their sustainability. The implications for society as a whole are manifold, as Brian Hill so aptly notes:

Social reforms from the biblical Amos to Africa's Mandela have been dissatisfied with the status quo, so long as it continues to exploit some in order that others might maximize their satisfaction. Let us endorse the indignation in our teaching, eschewing the spurious value-neutrality which allegedly leaves things as they are. (2001, p. 12)

Thus, it is necessary that researchers shift their gaze from isolated traits and skills of principals to adopt a systems view (Fullan, 2005), thereby connecting leaders' philosophical approaches with that of teachers to maximise students' educational satisfaction and learning outcomes.

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successful control of the body as power/knowledge and in his later work he termed it 'bio-power'.

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