

PRINCIPALS' EXPERIENCES OF REGIONAL NETWORKS

Submitted by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my children David, Rachel, Ben and Miriam.

In memory of Ian Gurvich.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the strong guidance, counsel and encouragement of my principal supervisor Associate Professor Philip Riley, whose wisdom and feedback have sustained me through the journey of this study. It has been a privilege to work with you. I value the time you have spent with me, and your patience.

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I especially want to acknowledge the principals who participated in this study and provided such rich data about their experiences. Their honesty, generosity of spirit and commitment to school improvement have made this study possible.


Statement of Authorship and Sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No parts of this thesis have been submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement to the main text of the thesis.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant authorities.

Signed: 

Date: 9 May 2017

Abstract

In the Australian state of Victoria, the years of the *Blueprint* policies (Department of Education & Training, 2003; Department of Education and Early Childhood, 2007a) represented a distinctive time of educational reform in which the quantum of strategies and resources that were fed into the education system were unprecedented. Regional Networks were one component of that reform agenda. Seventy such networks were formed in October 2008. They were system-organised groups of around 25 schools led by a Regional Network Leader. The intent of the structure was to build the capacity of principals and schools within a district by fostering collective responsibility for students through collaborative practices. However, the Regional Network structure ended prematurely after three years following a change of government in November 2010.

Principals were energised by the scope of the reforms which were supported by a range of resources that included extensive opportunities for professional learning. There was a flamboyance of implementation, which engaged principals and enlisted them in the vision of system alignment and high expectations. However, that flamboyance and directedness towards alignment, was also met with apprehension by some principals. System leaders intended the reform agenda to lift student outcomes across all schools, leading to the recognition of Victorian state education as a leader in the international educational landscape. The Regional Network structure ended without the opportunity for the initiative to run its course and without an evaluation of its achievements. How principals felt about the Regional Network experience, is the focus of this research.

This study was based on a hermeneutic phenomenological research design, inspired by van Manen's thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990, 2014). It explored 10

principals' experiences of Regional Networks, on three levels. First, the study reconstructed participants' stories as an essential understanding of the lived experience. Second, extended extracts were examined in relation to the contradictory range of emotions that were experienced. Third, a thematic analysis of the principals' experiences of the Regional Network experience was presented under the categories of what helped and what hindered principals in their work. In addition, the thematic analysis was anchored in theory through the lens of three frames: Systems Thinking (Senge, 2006); Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012); and Governance (Moore & Khagram, 2004). An additional insider perspective to the study was presented through the researcher's voice. As a former Regional Network Leader, the researcher included her own story to provide a unique counterpoint to principals' stories and placed her voice firmly within the research.

Principals included in this study were drawn from five different networks and represented the range of school types within a district. The research questions asked were: How did members of the Regional Network perceive the experience? In what ways did membership of Regional Networks help or hinder their work?

The findings of this research indicate that although principals had some mixed feelings they valued the Regional Network structure, which provided a designated leader to coordinate the activities and act as a conduit for policy implementation. The findings show that principals enjoyed the collegiality and professional learning and they regarded the governance structure as representative of their needs. However aspects of the Regional Network experience were problematic and did not satisfy all principals' professional needs. For example, mandated membership and restructures of some Regional Networks fuelled disillusionment. Activities that principals regarded as compliance exercises for the system such as the

development of detailed strategic plans were tolerated but not valued. The quality of the Regional Network Leaders also varied, as did their understanding of the different types of schools, which impacted on the support that could be offered by these leaders. The findings show that the needs of all schools were not met, particularly specialist and secondary schools. Principals looked to self-chosen networks to satisfy their professional needs and self-chosen networks co-existed with principals' participation in their Regional Network. For some principals, allegiance to self-chosen networks took precedence. While the features displayed by Regional Networks matched several of the features of networks outlined in the broader literature, they fell short in several areas and did not comply with the definition of networks that emerged from the literature. Because of their system-owned nature, Regional Networks would be more accurately described as *pseudo-networks*. However, principals were able to clearly articulate which aspects of their Regional Network membership helped or hindered their work. These insights contribute new knowledge to organisational structures for system-wide school reform. A new model of collaboration (TriCol) is introduced. TriCol addresses some of the problems raised by principals about the Regional Network structure. The TriCol model provides greater flexibility for collaboration and increased levels of expertise at the leadership level.

Keywords: Regional Networks; hermeneutic phenomenology; system-wide reform.

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Abbreviations

ABLES	Ability Based Learning and Education Support
AP	Assistant Principal
AiZ	Action Improvement Zones
AusVELS	The Australian Curriculum in Victoria
BER	Building the Education Revolution
DEECD	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
DE&T	Department of Education and Training
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EAZ	Education Action Zones
CIS	Council of International Schools
CL	Collaborative Leader
HPP	High Performing Principals' Program
IB	International Baccalaureate
IBAC	Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission
IQEA	Improving Quality Education for All
LEA	Local Education Authority
LGA	Local Government Area
LTs	Leading Teachers
MP	Member of Parliament
NAIF	Network Accountability and Improvement Framework.
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NMR	Northern Metropolitan Region
OGSE	Office of Government School Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PASS	Principals' Association of Specialist Schools
PCOs	Principal Class Officers
PD	Professional Development
PDS	Professional Development School
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PSD	Program for Student with Disabilities
PYP	Primary Years Program
RNL	Regional Network Leader
ROK	Republic of Korea
SARPP	Senior Advisor Regional Performance and Planning
SDS	Specialist Development School
SEOs	Senior Education Officers
SEILs	Senior Education Improvement Leaders
SMR	Southern Metropolitan Region
SRC	Student Representative Council
SSSOs	Student Support Services Officers
SWANs	Students With Additional Needs (Assessment materials)
TriCol	Tri-Collaborative
VASSP	Victorian Association of Secondary School Principals
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VPA	Victorian Principals' Association
WALC	West Alabama Learning Coalition
YRDSB	York Region District School Board

Chapter 1. Setting the Context

I felt for the first time that there was a sense of direction; there was a sense that we were professionals. (Sam, research participant)

My interest in this research project stems from not only 15 years' experience as a principal in Victorian government schools, but also as a passionate advocate of state education and its system improvement. As a principal I participated in system-wide school improvement initiatives, working closely with neighbouring schools in various system-organised, network-type collaborative groupings. I served on the Executive committees of such school groupings and for a period, took on the role of Network Chairperson. In contributing to building the capacity of aspirant leaders, I held the roles of coach and mentor within various system-generated programs. This background of leadership within the Victorian state education system, eventually led me to the newly created role of Regional Network Leader in October 2008, a position I held until June 2012 when changes in policy led to different government directions. Reflecting on the Regional Network structure and how it was perceived by principals is the focus of this study.

The Structure of this Thesis

The structure of this thesis is presented in eight chapters. Chapter 1 sets out the rationale for the study and explains the political context. The educational policies from which the Regional Network structure emerged are detailed and the Regional Network structure is explained to distinguish this structure from other system-organised structures that preceded it. Within this chapter, the researcher who is a former Regional Network Leader presents her own account of that experience in the form of a story, which offers an interesting parallel to the participants' stories which

are presented in Chapter 4. The presentation of the researcher's story, serves the additional purpose of adding to the search for openness according to van Manen's hermeneutic epoche-reduction (van Manen, 2014, p. 224) which includes the practice of "critical self-awareness" in relation to "vested interests" or "pre-understandings". Although this study does not strictly follow a hermeneutic phenomenology methodology, it was strongly influenced by the approach of allowing lived experiences to unveil themselves.

The literature review, which is contained in Chapter 2 covers the broader expanse of organisational networks including the complexity of the terminology that surrounds the range of organisational networks, their features and the sub-group of Education Networks into which Regional Networks must fit. Education Networks are set within the frame of Systems Thinking, (Senge, 2006) Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) and Governance (Moore & Khagram, 2004). A discussion of the work of network theorists (Earl & Katz, 2006; Fullan, 2000; Hadfield, Jobling, Noden, O'Leary, & Stott, 2006; Hopkins, Harris, Stoll, & McKay, 2011) and the inclusion of a table showing the developmental aspect to networks (Hopkins, 2007) demonstrate the potential impact that high levels of collaboration in networks can achieve. The identification of the essential features of successful Education Networks confirms that these features are present in a wide range of Educational Networks, both large and small. These features are summarised as: knowledge creation, utilization and transfer; consistency of values and focus; clarity of structure; voluntary membership; agency through a shared commitment to action; dispersed leadership and empowerment, shared resources. Throughout this section of the literature review, examples of a diverse range of successful Education Networks are presented. These are considered to be successful in terms of achieving their

goals. The researcher identifies and critically evaluates the current research available into Regional Networks (Butler, 2014; Hopkins, Munro, & Craig, 2011; Griffin, Woods, Nguyen, Mountain, & Wood, 2010), while demonstrating that the lack of research in this area justifies the study which is presented.

Chapter 3 sets out the research design, methodology and methods. This chapter outlines the researcher's rationale for choosing a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach and the way in which this methodology translates into the presented research method. The lived experience of 10 principals is the vehicle for this research. Experiences are analysed according to van Manen's (van Manen, 1990, 2014) thematic analysis guide. Within this chapter, the important issue of insider research is also addressed. As a former principal and Regional Network Leader, the researcher has given due consideration to the ways in which insider status may affect the process of this research and the measures taken to ensure that appropriate thought and action was given to possibilities of bias is outlined. The richness of language and honesty of views expressed in the transcripts, suggest that the insider connection has helped to build trust and connection in this project. The researcher details how the literature that has been consulted (Unluer, 2012; Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kanuha, 2000) has provided valuable guidance in ensuring that the researcher's insider status has not compromised the integrity of the study.

Chapter 4 presents the reconstructed stories of the principals based on the recorded interviews and transcripts that provide the evidence that each experience is unique. As part of the phenomenological, interpretative process the reconstructed stories represent the researcher's "reduction" (van Manen, 2014, p. 224) of the essential lived experience of each principal who was interviewed for this study.

Chapter 5 provides an analysis of three extended extracts to illustrate the range of contradictory emotions that could be experienced by principals as members of the Regional Network. These three extracts are considered within the frame of functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Paulsen, 2012). These extracts, which are taken from the transcripts of Laura, Martin and Jennie and are not referred to when analysing themes in Chapters 6 and 7, highlight the complexity around the emotions connected with memories of the Regional Networks.

The themes that emerged from the reconstructed stories and the transcripts of interviews are analysed in Chapters 6 and 7. These two chapters are twin chapters; they are strongly connected. Chapter 6 presents an analysis of the themes that assisted principals in their work; the themes that were seen to hinder principals are analysed in Chapter 7. The introduction to Chapter 6, in which the process for thematic analysis is explained, is equally relevant to Chapter 7. Conversely, the application of the theoretical frameworks as additional lenses and the synthesis of the analysis at the end of Chapter 7, relates to both these chapters.

The theoretical frameworks previously outlined in the literature review and discussed in relation to themes, moderate the thematic analysis and suitably anchor it in theory. The three frameworks employed for this purpose are Systems Thinking (Senge, 2006); Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012); and Governance (Moore & Khagram, 2004).

Chapter 8, the final chapter of this thesis, provides a summary of the project and outlines the findings and contributions to new knowledge. Consideration for areas of further research, and the limitations of the study, are also included in this chapter. A detailed appendix follows containing a sample transcript of one interview; an explanation of how the thematic analysis was carried out; an extract

from the researcher's progress journal setting out the initial process for analysis; examples of thematic extracts; the interview guide; and ethics approval letters.

Research questions. The following questions have been the catalyst for this research.

1. How did principals perceive their experience of Regional Networks?
2. In what ways did membership of Regional Networks help or hinder principals in their work?

The international and national policy context

The significance of the introduction of an initiative such as Regional Networks needs to be placed within a global and national context to understand the rationale behind such a large-scale system investment in the capability-building of its workforce. Strategies involving network-type collaborations at the district level had been introduced in England as well as other countries in Europe, Canada and the United States. Such collaborations are discussed in detail in subsequent chapters of this thesis. However, the point is emphasised that such alliances were beginning to influence the national and state landscapes in Australia and as a principal in the Victorian system at the time, I had the opportunity to observe such collaborations in England, Canada and the United States in 2006, two years before Regional Networks were introduced into Victoria.

The global challenge of improving education systems is recognised to be at the heart of economic productivity and rising standards of living (OECD, 2003). Australia, as a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) since 1971, has been influenced by attempts at system wide school improvement within the developed world. When Tony Blair took office in

England in May 1997 there was a clear agenda to improve literacy and numeracy as core priorities (Fullan, 2009). Fullan (2009) outlines the targets of 80% proficiency in literacy and 75% in numeracy for 11 year-olds starting at a base of 62%. “This was an enormous goal because it involved the entire system of 20,000 schools and a timeline of essentially four years” (Fullan, 2009, p.3). The strategies introduced and led by Michael Barber included both support through capacity-building and pressure through strong accountability measures. These measures were directed at state, district and community levels.

In Australia in 1999, *The Adelaide Declaration* (MCEETYA, 1999) set out national goals for schooling, emphasising the importance of every child being literate and numerate. *The Adelaide Declaration* acknowledged the capacity of all young people to learn, and the role of schooling in developing that capacity. It also identified the important role of parents as the first educators of their children and the critical role of teachers in the learning process.

The global quest for system-wide school improvement extended from England to Ontario in 2003 where similar approaches to school improvement reform witnessed in England, were introduced (Fullan, 2008; Levin, 2012). This entailed the large-scale reform of “900 elementary schools and 900 secondary schools across 72 districts focussed on strategies of high proficiency in literacy and numeracy” (Fullan, 2008, p. 6). The big shift to explicit teaching according to Fullan (2009) began in 1997 in England, moving to Canada and the United States. Elmore (2004, p.7) acknowledged the large-scale improvement agenda that “has been at the center of contemporary school reform for a decade or more”. These trends extended to a strong national and state influence in Australia fuelled by the 2003 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report (OECD, 2003).

PISA measures how well 15 year-olds who are coming to the end of their compulsory schooling, are prepared to use their knowledge and skills to solve real life opportunities and challenges. The first assessment carried out in 2000 indicated wide disparities of performance in the PISA standardised Literacy and Numeracy tests. In Australia the results indicated that while there were there large numbers of students (14-19%) who achieved high levels on test scores (OECD, 2003) Australia did less well on reducing the number of students with low levels of achievement, indicating wide levels of disparity in performance. This trend has continued (Thompson, De Bortoli & Underwood, 2017) and results have influenced the evolution of both national and state policy. The Victorian context is covered in more detail in the next section.

Evolution of Victorian Education Policy

Some specific knowledge of the landscape of Victorian educational reform, against which the Regional Network structure was introduced, is helpful in understanding the significance of the structure as a wide-scale, system-generated, school improvement strategy. This period of reform was set against the background of a Labor government in power for the first time since 1992, displacing the Liberal/National Coalition government. Initially, a Labor victory in 1999 was tenuous but the government was formed with the parliamentary support of three Independents. Labor was returned for a second term in 2002 with a majority government and again, in 2006 for a third term, with a decreased majority. Nevertheless, a mandate and urgency for significant educational reform was present.

To fully comprehend the sense of urgency for reform within the educational arena, one needs to take a broader picture of Victorian government reforms by

looking at the seminal policy document first released in 2001, *Growing Victoria Together* (Victoria, 2001). This policy presented Victorians with a ten-year vision for a better society. This vision was built around the following:

- a thriving economy based on quality jobs and innovative industries across the state.
- quality health and education.
- protecting our environment for future generations and the efficient use of resources.
- caring, fair communities that are friendly and respectful of diversity.
- a vibrant democracy based on accountable government and sound financial management.

From this broad, new vision for Victoria, the lens moved to Education. The ongoing challenge and rationale for all schools was to improve students' performance. The government's Education response to these umbrella policies was outlined in two related policy documents. The first, the *Blueprint for Government Schools* (DE&T, 2003) was revised in 2007 with the publication of the *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform*. (DEECD, 2007a) The following graphic shows the evolution of Education policy in Victoria in relation to the broader policy directions for the whole state.

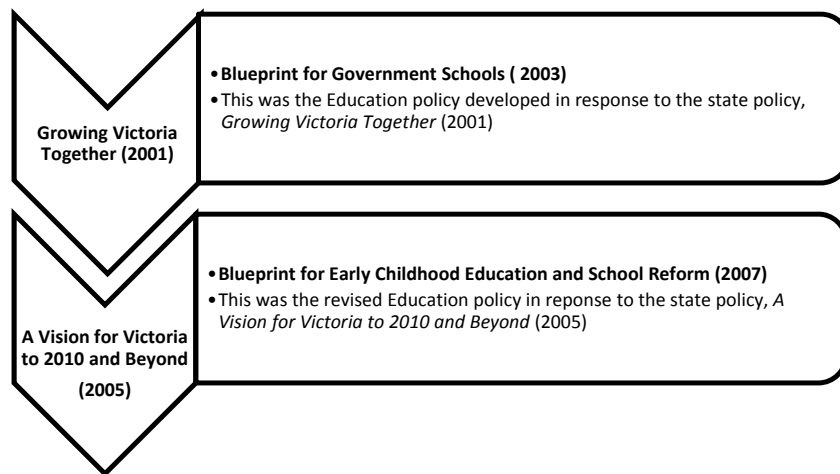


Figure 1. Representation of policy evolution.

The Blueprint Policies: 2003 and 2007. In the Minister's Foreword to the new policy document, *Blueprint for Government Schools* (DE&T, 2003) Lynne Kosky MP announced, "This government has made education the number one priority." But in acknowledging this point she expressed the need to further improve the system. Kosky outlined her concerns and the case for reform as follows:

Despite all that has been achieved over the past four years, we need to concentrate further upon improved learning outcomes for students. Some groups of students continue to have poor levels of literacy and other basic skills. These students can be concentrated in particular schools and particular areas of the state. They tend to have high rates of absenteeism from school and are more likely to leave school early. There are also high variations in outcomes between classes within schools and between schools with similar student populations. (DE&T, 2003, p. 1)

Based on this rationale, the Labor government embarked upon a determined, system-wide strategy to improve educational outcomes for all students. As a result

of research and analysis of data on patterns of student outcomes and student performance in Victoria, and on the factors that influence student outcomes in schooling, three key features of the school system were identified as lacking:

1. The high concentration of poor student outcomes in some regions that face the challenge of dealing with a diverse range of student needs.
2. Within given schools there were high variations in outcomes between classes.
3. Between schools with similar student populations there were variations in outcomes.

On this basis and after wide community consultation in the development of a policy document, the *Blueprint for Government Schools* (DE&T, 2003) was launched. It identified seven *Flagship strategies* that provided a strong and optimistic agenda of reforms backed by political endorsement and resources, which centred around improving the performance of students and building the capacity of staff and services across the system.

As a former principal working within the system at the time, I would argue that the suite of initiatives introduced through the *Blueprint* reforms (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007a) defines this period as a *golden age* in educational reform. The Office of Government School Education (OGSE) now had former, successful school professionals leading OGSE, as opposed to bureaucrats. This, in itself, was a strong symbolic change. The focus for the OGSE became creating the optimum conditions for improvement; developing the capacity of leaders to bring out the best in their staff; increasing teacher effectiveness; building strong and positive relationships with the education workforce; and understanding the connection between theory,

research and practice. There was a genuine attempt to utilise the best international research and use the data generated by the system to help schools to find the most suitable improvement strategy for their stage of development.

Evidence-based models.

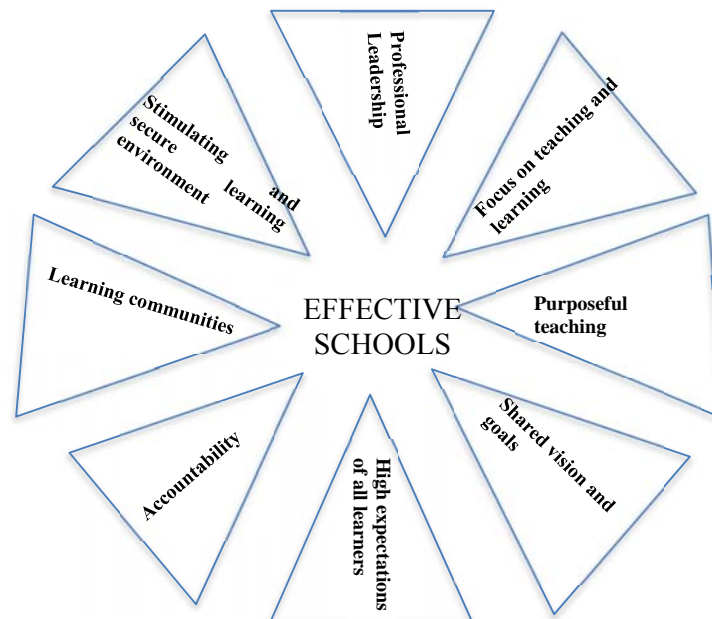


Figure 2. Effective Schools Model (DEECD, 2010 p.9).

The OGSE identified the *Effective Schools Model* (DE&T, 2005, p.17) as the core of its vision and its graphic representation shown in Figure 2, was included in many core documents as an important symbol of the system's intentions for all schools. The model was based on the review of school effectiveness research conducted by Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore (1995) and provided a framework for referencing initiatives contained in the two *Blueprint* (DE&T, 2003; DEECD,

2007a) policy documents. The essential elements of the *Effective Schools Model* (DE&T, 2005 presented above in Figure 2 is now expanded upon.

The element of Professional Leadership was reflected in the adoption of Sergiovanni's domains of leadership set out in *The Developmental Learning Framework for School Leaders* (DEECD, 2007b) which provided both a direction for leadership development and served as a basis for principal preparation, selection and performance development. The various capabilities set out in this framework are outlined in detail because the collaborative work that became the focus of the Regional Networks stemmed from this model, which represented a common language for school leaders and a coordinated approach to school improvement.

High Expectations, as the next component of an effective school (DE&T, 2005, p.17) were applied through the leadership development framework, which created a continuum of leadership capabilities and raised the bar for leadership performance with clear levels of progression. The performance and development culture now formed the basis for Accountability (DE&T, 2005, p.17), together with a differentiated process of school reviews. A Stimulating and Secure Learning Environment (DE&T, 2005, p.17) was reflected in a commitment to refurbish all schools by 2017 and the introduction of the Leading Schools Fund (DE&T, 2005, p.17) would provide school development, including large investment in new facilities. The Focus on Teaching and Learning and Purposeful Teaching (DE&T, 2005, p.17) was expanded upon in a model for *Effective Professional Learning* (DE&T, 2005). This model emphasised the student at the centre of learning and included a range of development programs, to improve teachers' skills, such as coaching and mentoring.

A Shared Vision and Goals, another essential element of an effective school (DE&T, 2005, p.17) was clearly articulated throughout the *Blueprint* policies (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007a) and a range of documents was subsequently developed to promote a unified vision across the system. Such documents included regular communication to principals by the OGSE via a newsletter from the Deputy Secretary, which always contained professional reading, the alignment of all development opportunities and programs. Another important structural change to reinforce the capability of Shared Vision and Goals (DE&T, 2005, p.17) was the grouping of schools into Regional Networks. This structure became the focus of my research.

A quality state education system was critical to the development of a highly skilled workforce. To achieve the social, cultural and economic growth to which both Victoria and Australia aspired, stronger educational reforms were required. The evidence presented that Victoria was not performing to its potential, led to the need to review initial policy directions for educational improvement, culminating in a second and revised *Blueprint* document, the *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform* (DEECD, 2007a). This definitive and strategic document, launched in 2008, resulted in a major re-structure of the departments responsible for Early Years and Schools education.

The strong movement for cultural change required a big-picture solution; one of transformation to a new Department of Education and Early Childhood (DEECD). The introduced structure merged the two previously separate areas, Early Childhood and Schools, into the one new department, led by two ministers: Bronwyn Pike MP, Minister for Education; and Maxine Morand MP, Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development. This amalgamation was a response to

the need for a seamless education system that would cover children from birth to the end of their schooling. The merger addressed the need for an integrated approach and policy framework for early childhood services and school education, allowing all children make continuous learning and development progress.

The quantum and scope of the strategies and resources fed into the system, along with an ambitious theory of action for system alignment, mark this period as a distinctive and exciting time in Victorian education that is not likely to be seen again. The key agents of change at this time were the Deputy Secretary and his colleagues within the OGSE, together with the 1800 members of principal class whose schools were grouped into around 64 collaborative networks (prior to the introduction of Regional Networks in 2008) each chaired by a principal. Local groups of schools also belonged to other partnerships and clusters to work on shared interests and regional offices had an important role in monitoring the schools in their area.

In 2006 the Department identified the need to build the capacity and potential of the networks as they existed at the time, to drive system-wide improvement with a greater urgency. This led, in October 2008, to the introduction of the system-organised school groupings that promised to be a critical tool in building capacity of school leaders. These groups were called Regional Networks. A detailed description of Regional Networks, their operations and how they differed from previous collaborations by principals' groups, is outlined in the next section of this chapter.

Regional Networks

What were Regional Networks? Within the new vision for a superior education system, outlined in the previous section of this chapter, Regional Networks were introduced as a structural attempt at system-wide school improvement. They formed part of a suite of strategies introduced by the Labor government between 2003 and 2008 in response to the goal of creating a world-class education system in Victoria. In October 2008 the Regional Networks came into being. Existing collaborative networks were re-structured with a mandated membership of around 25 locally-grouped schools. New system leaders, Regional Network Leaders (RNLs), were appointed to drive school improvement at the local level. However this model of Regional Networks was a short-lived phenomenon, ending prematurely with a change in state government. Regional Networks were introduced as a deliberate system strategy to improve educational outcomes in Victorian government schools (DEECD, 2010). The intention was, that by aligning schools and mobilising their collaborative efforts, schools would improve by reducing variations in student outcomes from school to school within a local area. The focus included an emphasis on collective moral purpose (Fullan, 2003) that would connect schools and be the driving force to improvement.

The main feature of the structure of Regional Networks, compared with what was previously in place, was the appointment of a mid-level system leader for each of the 70 new networks. These system leaders, Regional Network Leaders (RNLs), were, in most cases, already experienced principals within the system. The goal was that each RNL would lead and facilitate the school improvement agenda of the network, in collaboration with an Executive committee of principals from the network. In this way the new Regional Networks combined aspects of both central

and shared leadership models but RNLs were clearly agents of, and spokespersons, for the system and as such were a conduit for policy implementation. Membership of these new networks was not voluntary; schools were expected to be involved and were allocated to their network by the regional office based on their locality and the size of the networks was limited. Therefore each network generally consisted of the same number of schools. The networks that were established in the Southern Metropolitan Region of Victoria drew into their net 249 schools. These schools were included in the local government areas of Bayside, Cardinia, Casey, Frankston, Glen Eira, Greater Dandenong, Kingston, Mornington Peninsula, Port Phillip and Stonnington.

Expectations of Regional Network Leaders. The new RNL positions were advertised on the government schools' website called Recruitment on Line; the applications closed on the 25th July 2008. The start date indicated on the advertisement was the 5th October 2008, which was the beginning of the final school term for that year. The end date published in the advertisement was the 4th October 2013, indicating a tenured position of five years. The position description also indicated that the role required "outstanding leaders and educators who form part of the regional team." (DEECD, 2008b). The job description outlined the expectations of improving the performance of all the schools in the network. This would be achieved through building the collective capacity and understanding the varied and distinctive needs of the schools in the network. The intention that the differential needs of each school would be reflected in the development of a Network Strategic Plan was also expressed. Regional Network Leaders were expected to design improvement strategies and allocate resources for this purpose. The government's

vision for school improvement was clearly articulated in the job description that was advertised.

The work of the Regional Network Leaders is guided by the government's objectives for school system development and reform, workforce reform and partnerships with parents and communities. It is nested within the system accountability and improvement framework. (DEECD, 2008b)

The Key Selection Criteria outlined in the job description suggested that these positions heralded a new order of system reform in Victorian government schools. The position was advertised at the top of the principal salary range with scope for increments over the life of the position; it was an attractive prospect for any experienced principal thinking about taking the next leadership step within the system. The selection criteria are now outlined for the purpose of promoting an understanding of the importance of the new roles and the rationale behind them.

1. Demonstrated capacity to support communities in planning for improved student outcomes and pathways.
2. Highly developed leadership skills and a proven record in building leadership capacity in others.
3. Demonstrated skills in change management, strategic thinking, and data analysis to set direction and inform improvement within individual schools, the network and the region.
4. Highly developed communication, negotiation and interpersonal skills, including the ability to represent the interests of the department and facilitate cooperative working relationships with a range of stakeholders.

5. A sound knowledge of government policies and priorities particularly as they relate to education and the Victorian government school reform agenda. (DEECD, 2008b)

The *Network Accountability and Improvement Framework* (NAIF), (DEECD, 2010) in introducing the rationale for Regional Networks in Victoria, identified the features of effective networks as instruments of system-wide improvement. The NAIF (DEECD, 2010, p. 5) set out the RNL's responsibilities as follows:

- Leading the development of a network's strategic plan, provision planning and principal performance and development process.
- Developing leadership capacity within and across network schools.
- Strengthening the instructional capacity of school leaders to improve the quality of teacher practice, with a particular emphasis on literacy and numeracy.
- Deploying network resources strategically and efficiently.
- Creating a culture of collaboration and collective accountability within the network and across the region.
- Facilitating partnerships with community, business and other agencies.
- Supporting the delivery of Department initiatives and the implementation of policy.
- RNLs are directly accountable to their Regional Director and Assistant Regional Director-School Improvement and are members of their region's leadership team. (DEECD, 2010, p. 5).

Victorian Regional Networks were based on a theory of action that was definitively articulated in the policy documents. The general concept of a theory of

action (Argyris & Schon, 1982), argues that individuals espouse theories of actions or a set of propositions to describe, assess and justify their behaviour. In this sense the Regional Network structure was linked to the concept of a theory of action around building knowledge, common goals, sharing resources and clear accountabilities. When articulating the theory of action for Regional Networks in Victoria, the NAIF (DEECD, 2010, p. 5) identified five assumptions that, it was believed, would lead to system transformation through improvement in every school. These related to accountability, the skills of the network leaders to drive improvement, the responsibilities of the Regional Directors, increased human resources directly to schools and the strengthening of collaboration.

The accountability framework had a number of core principles underpinning its guidelines. These were: ensuring that there was alignment with current models through values and language; focusing on a clearly targeted approach to improving student and network outcomes; the provision of clear accountabilities that could be understood at the individual, school and network level; and supporting collaboration that fostered the development of genuinely supportive relationships through consultation (DEECD, 2010).

Governance of Regional Networks. The expectation for the governance of Regional Networks was also clearly articulated in the NAIF (DEECD, 2010), which outlined that each RNL was responsible for the formation of a network leadership team (Executive) which comprised a maximum of three principals. This team had a “leadership and advisory role in supporting the development and implementation of the network strategic plan and in assuring effective succession planning” (DEECD, 2010, p. 6). The leadership team was overseen by the Regional Director. Members were selected with input from network principals, based on their capacity to achieve

the goals of the network. The recommendation on the composition of the network leadership team required endorsement by the Assistant Regional Director, School Improvement. The network leadership team had the capacity to co-opt members from other organisations, for example, a member of the Local Learning and Employment Network, if such a co-option was seen to support the “development of provision arrangements or support improved transition between early childhood service providers and schools” (DEECD, 2010, p. 6). The leadership team also had the power to establish subgroups, which comprised both member principals and others outside the network, who were responsible for particular activities, which supported the achievement of the network’s objectives. Such subgroups related to areas of professional learning, curriculum development projects, transition or marketing. It was expected that networks develop terms of reference to guide the operations of the group, which included allocation of responsibilities, the approach to consultation and the development of protocols for data sharing.

Promotion and publicity. There was a great deal of publicity and promotion attached to the appointment of the Regional Network Leaders and the rollout of the new structure. An article in the Education Department’s internal newspaper of the day, *Education Times*, featured a lead article promoting the new role and picturing all the newly appointed RNLs with Michael Fullan at a special reception held at the central office. The caption under the photo read:

Catalysts for change: The 70 new Regional Network Leaders (RNLs) will next year commence their role of supporting principals to deliver school improvements across the state. As RNL John Nelson put it: “We have huge capacity waiting to be harnessed in our networks through sharing the teacher expertise that exists closest to the classroom.” (DEECD, 2008a, p. 1)

Other articles regularly appeared in the new, glossy, internal magazine called *Shine*. Each month, RNLs were featured in a promotional article. I was invited to participate in April 2009 as one of the first RNLs to be featured. The article with an adjacent colour photo, began as follows:

Judi Gurvich has her sights fixed firmly on one goal only: to make a bigger contribution to public education in Southern Metropolitan Region. (DEECD, 2009b, p. 57)

The proactive promotion of the RNL role demonstrated in the articles quoted above, suggested that these were important positions created for a time of great change, system alignment and positive educational reform that had not previously been seen in Victoria.

However, the Regional Network structure became a phenomenon of short lifespan. The government changed back to Liberal/National in November 2010, bringing with it new directions that heralded an end to the Regional Network structure. The demise occurred at a time when the structure had just established itself with each Regional Network focusing on the goals outlined through their strategic plans. Network strategic plans were based on the analysis of collective data from which common priorities for the next four years were identified. The Regional Network structure formally ceased on June 30th 2012, however, many networks had already lost their impetus months before that as their leaders left to take up other positions. The dramatically changed regional structure reduced the number of regions across the state from nine to four. Staff in regional offices were also heavily reduced as the new policy directions translated into the staffing restructure. The short and interrupted lifespan of Regional Networks saw this configuration of collaborative school groups come to an end, leaving a largely unfulfilled mission

and many questions unanswered about the impact of Regional Networks. *The Age* newspaper, in reporting on the demise of the RNL role, outlined that,

The state government admits it axed dozens of education staff hired to help struggling schools lift their game - despite its own research findings they were valuable and most principals wanted to keep them. A “strike team” of about 70 school officials lost their jobs last year as part of a contentious restructure the Coalition said was designed to give principals more autonomy and cut red tape. (Tomazin, 2013)

Maxine McKew, in her book *Class Act* (McKew, 2014) documented the progress made in lifting standards in the Northern Metropolitan Region (NMR) schools. She puzzled over the decision to end the Regional Networks, when she wrote:

In 2011, in one of those bewildering decisions that cause head shaking all round, the state government dismantled the system of Regional Networks. Overnight, a group of dedicated people who were vital in achieving a lift to overall performance were declared ‘surplus to requirements’. What was lost was the collective knowledge that was shared *across* schools. (2014, p. 98)

A Regional Network Leader's Story: My Story

Throughout this project the opportunity to explore the lived experience of other principals has been the motivating factor in choosing a phenomenological research method. I have been deeply curious about the perceptions of principals about the Regional Network structure because in my role as a Regional Network leader I was an integral part of that structure, and invested in it heavily, both professionally and emotionally. The period of its existence between October 2008 and its eventual, official demise at the end of June 2012, for me was an exciting and then turbulent, time. I use the term *official demise*, because its death was slow and lingering, being announced at least a year before the structure officially ended. Therefore this is my perception of that time to set alongside the 10 other lived experiences of the participants in this research project.

When I decided to apply for the Regional Network leader role I had been a principal for 10 years. I was passionate and successful in that role, and had also been actively involved in the local network of schools as it existed at the time, being at one time the Chair of the network and an active member of the Executive committee for a number of years. I strongly believed in the idea of schools working collaboratively and there had been several examples of such collaboration through the sharing and professional development opportunities that we had begun to generate within my local district of schools. However there was a lot of time involved in my commitment to that network that required me to be out of my school on a regular basis; I thought it was too much time and I thought that my school was suffering. Ideally, what I believed was needed, was a full-time system leader of the network to truly drive school and system improvement forward.

The *Blueprint* agenda (DE&T, 2003; DEECD 2007a) was by then well-established and I was fortunate to have received a grant through the *High Performing Principals Program* in 2006, to travel to the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, to study the ways in which schools collaborated through various network structures. The mood of the time was charged with opportunity and innovation. The system was energised in a way I had not seen it before, and I was ready to take a larger part in it, should the opportunity arise. So, when the Regional Network Leader role was announced amid great fanfare and promotion, I was encouraged to throw my hat in the ring, and was successful in being appointed as one of the 70 new Regional Network Leaders who were going to drive the change to improved learning outcomes across Victoria.

The appointment process, which had been rigorous and lengthy, came with a training program at the beginning of each year, along with several professional learning days throughout the year. These days focused on change management, system alignment, coaching and mentoring, data analysis and curriculum. It appeared that the investment in the Regional Network Leader structure was almost limitless, and as a beneficiary of that professional learning, I felt extremely privileged. I entered into a five-year contract at a considerably higher salary than I had previously been receiving and I believed that I had reached the pinnacle of my career, doing a job that I loved and was totally committed to. The new positions received a great deal of kudos and promotion within the system's marketing machine. We all believed, and were affirmed in that belief at every turn, that our work was important and system changing.

I had begun working with a network of 27 schools in Term 4, 2008. It took a while for the new structure to come together, and as several participants in this

project have attested to, there were teething problems with some principals, who were used to a different way of operating, accepting the new structure. There was certainly an aspect of “a boys’ club” culture when I began with the network. However, slowly we built a relationship of trust and I worked closely with the Executive to develop a school improvement agenda for the district and implement the system’s *Blueprint* policy directions, which emphasised alignment and accountability through building the capacity of its workforce. We embarked on several school improvement projects, which were embraced by network principals, and generously resourced by the system. These included a numeracy and literacy professional development program for teachers; the allocation of coaches to schools; an aspirant leaders program; a graduate teachers support program and a small schools program that assisted schools of fewer than 180 students with administrative and professional development support; a data analysis training program for principals and assistant principals; and an *Instructional Rounds* program that prepared principals to become more confident instructional leaders.

However I never envisaged that the contract that I had signed, and for which I had resigned my principal’s position, was not what I thought it to be. The new role was in the firing line after the Labor government lost the election in November 2010 and even though this news took about 12 months to filter through it was soon made clear that our positions, along with many others, would have to go. The Regional Network Leaders were deemed to be political appointments and the agenda had now changed. I was shell-shocked for quite a while and then had to accept that the job that I thought was secure for five years, and would probably see me through to retirement, was no longer so. After quite some time it became clear that the option was to apply for one of the new Senior Advisor role or to try to return to a school as

an acting principal for the remaining two years of my contract. I was not interested in the new Senior Advisor roles, as that role was very different, so I decided to try and find another principal position.

This proved harder than it seemed as by now the RNL roles were considered to be tainted positions, in spite of all the experience gained by those who had taken on these roles. Schools with a principal vacancy had the option to accept a Regional Network Leader as their acting principal as Regional Network Leaders were members of the principal class and were contracted for another two years. However, many school councils were not interested in having an ex-Regional Network Leader as their acting principal. They wanted to advertise their principal vacancy and make their own selection rather than having a regional person placed at their school in an acting role. The experience was humiliating as I was expected to meet with school council presidents, without an advocate, to see if they would consider me for the position at their school. There was no proper process for this, and it appeared to be ad hoc. I was often made to feel like a leper during that time. I felt completely let down by the system and the professional organisations.

In June 2012 I was offered and accepted the position of principal of a merged primary school with two campuses, and although the staff accepted me reluctantly, I spent two very happy and fulfilling years in that role. With all the experience I had gained as a network leader, it was not difficult to see what the school needed and how I could contribute to moving it forward. Nevertheless, I often felt that the neighbouring principals treated me with suspicion and I felt that I was never really accepted as part of the new network. In spite of everything I remained committed to the state system and what it stood for, but I could not help feeling nostalgic about the Regional Network Leader role and its lost opportunities.

I look back on that time in the recent history of state education in Victoria, as a special and exciting time. It was a time driven by innovative agendas for system-wide school improvement that genuinely sought to build the capacity of its leaders and teachers through investment in people. I also look back on that time, in hindsight, as a naïve time, in which Gatsby-like leaders sought to forge a golden age of Victorian education which, in the end, appeared to have fed on its own dreams and lost sight of its obligations to accountability. As the narrator of F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic story, *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway (1925/1993) describes Gatsby's vision, "It was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again" (Scott Fitzgerald, 1925/1993, p. 4). That remains my over-riding perception of that time of Victorian educational reforms. I think of that time and its leaders as adhering to a Gatsby-like dream of what education in Victoria could be.

Significance of the study

This study describes a unique and exciting time in the history of Victorian state education: Regional Networks. The goal of the networks was to achieve system-wide school improvement focussed on capacity-building and alignment. This study explores the experiences of principals who were members of Regional Networks: how those experiences helped or hindered their work. I also bring an insider perspective, drawing on my own experiences in the system. The study aimed to uncover new insights about the needs of school leaders and how system initiatives affect collaboration and change across a district of schools. No other study has explored principals' lived experiences of Regional Networks or presented the insider perspectives that the researcher brings as a former principal and Regional Network

Leader. Through the analysis of themes emerging from principals' experiences, these perspectives shine new light on the importance of effective collaboration, the needs of principals and preferred models for the future.

In summary, this chapter sets the context for the thesis. It explains the researcher's particular interest in embarking upon this research; outlines the structure and content of each chapter of the thesis; introduces the research questions; details the educational policy and political landscape behind the introduction of Regional Networks as a key tool for system wide school improvement. In addition, the nature, governance and accountability imperatives for Regional Networks are set out culminating in the researcher's insider perspective through the presentation of her own story.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Network researchers must consider the potential conceptual differences across network types. (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005, p. 165)

There are many different types of networks and many theories about the way in which networks function. From biological models such as ant and bee colonies (Kesebir, 2012) to groups of people interacting on-line, each is studied in different way. Networks have been described by some researchers in biological terms such as “organic” (Mullen & Kochan, 2000, p.183) because the relationships that form through networks, lead to collective rather than individual behaviours to achieve desired goals.

Understanding the concept of networks is complex because there is not one distinct form of network that we can say is *the* network structure. The difficulty for a researcher exploring the concept of *networks* is initially one of language and definition; a challenge in studying networks is to adequately specify what they are and what they are not. It is therefore important to examine the nature of any network - its type and how it differs from other types - in order to settle on a workable definition that will be the springboard for a more focused investigation of the Regional Network.

This literature review moves from the general to the particular, setting out the broad features of organisational networks for the purpose of clarifying where Regional Networks sit within that spectrum. An awareness of how Regional Networks compare with other organisational networks, particularly other education networks, assists in understanding the ways in which membership of Regional Networks helped or hindered principals in their work.

The term *networks*, has been used to describe relational partnerships across varying organisations. There are many different types of collaborations which serve the purpose of mutually benefiting its members and which fit within the broad definition of a network as discussed in the literature. The over-arching frameworks of Systems Thinking (Senge, 2006); Social Capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 1992, 2000; Coleman, 1990); Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012); and Governance (Haveri, 2006; Moore & Khagram, 2004; Osborne, 2007; Rhodes, 1994, 1996, 2007) are essential to understanding network structures, including the Regional Networks. Through these frames, the context for understanding the importance of knowledge-exchange, trust and relationships, as the connecting thread for the interactions of organisational networks, is examined. After detailing the nature of Corporate and International Networks, the literature review focuses specifically on Education Networks of which Regional Networks is a sub-set.

From this perspective the discussion of the work of Education Network theorists (Earl & Katz, 2006; Fullan, 2000; Hadfield, Jobling, Noden, O'Leary, & Stott, 2006; Hopkins, Harris, Stoll, & McKay, 2011) and the inclusion of a table showing the developmental aspect of such networks (Hopkins, 2007) demonstrate the potential impact that high levels of collaboration in networks can achieve. The identification of the essential features of successful Education Networks confirms that these features are present in a wide range of educational networks, both large and small. These features are summarised as: knowledge creation, utilisation and transfer; consistency of values and focus; clarity of structure; voluntary membership; agency through a shared commitment to action; dispersed leadership and empowerment; and shared resources. Examples of a diverse range of Education

Networks that have been successful in achieving their goals are presented. These examples have been chosen because they display the features summarised above.

In this chapter the researcher identifies and critically evaluates the current research available into Regional Networks (Butler, 2014; Griffin, Woods, Nguyen, Mountain, & Wood, 2010; Hopkins, Munro, & Craig, 2011), while demonstrating that the lack of research in this area justifies the phenomenological study, which is presented.

Conceptual Frameworks for Examining Organisational Networks

The three frameworks illustrated below capture the key components and influences on networks. Members join networks because of common interest and the advantages such connection offers; members form part of the inter-connecting threads of a system-like structure that has clear operational guidelines and distributed leadership.

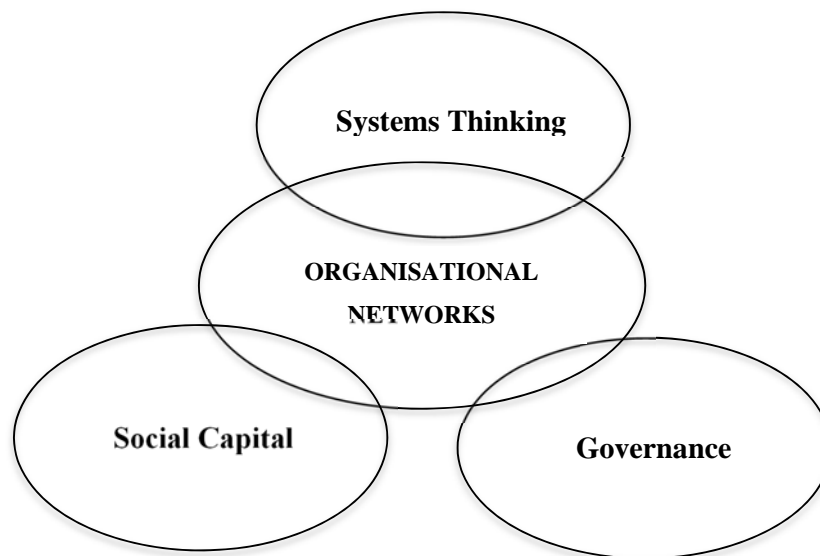


Figure 3. Conceptual framework for examination of organisational networks.

Systems Thinking. For Senge (2006), Systems Thinking is one of the five disciplines that make up his conceptual framework of a learning organisation. Systems Thinking is the fifth discipline. The other four disciplines are: Personal Mastery (a special level of proficiency); Mental Models (deeply ingrained assumptions that influence); Building Shared Vision and Team Learning. Senge's (2006, p.7) "conceptual framework" of Systems Thinking sees business and human endeavours as systems bound by invisible threads of interrelated actions, "which can take years to fully play out their effects on each other" (2006, p.7). As part of the intricate web of connections it is hard to see the whole pattern of change. Because of the complexity of organisations today, seeing those relationships within a systems approach brings clarity and team learning is a key component of a progressive organisation. In a learning organisation people share knowledge and ideas and learn from each other. Senge (2006, p. 14) distinguishes between "survival learning" or "adaptive learning" as opposed to the "generative learning" of a true learning organisation that enhances the ability to create a "learning organisation" which is one that is continually expanding its capacity to create an improved future through building individual and collective skills in an open but accountable environment.

The concept of a learning organisation encapsulates a shift in thinking from seeing oneself as separate from the world to connected to it. Senge calls this shift in thinking "metanoia" and this concept is at the heart of learning organisations in the definition that learning is about "re-creating ourselves" (Senge, 2006, p. 13).

Social Capital and Professional Capital. Social capital is the sum total of all the resources that an individual can leverage as a result of their connections within a network of mutual acquaintances. It serves as an essential and unifying umbrella across human network structures, linking individuals or groups through their

relationships (Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 2000; Coleman, 1990), that provide an advantage. Burt (2000) describes social capital as a metaphor of advantage, suggesting that those in society who do better are somehow better connected to others, trusting them, obligated to support them and dependent on their exchanges. In this way networks are largely affected by social capital through their established relationships and norms that can act to influence behaviour and exclude others from the group (Coleman, 1990; Granovetter, 1985, 1992). Depending on the network type, the nature of social capital varies but the important link of connection fuelled by relationships is integral to all networks (Church et al., 2002; Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Jarillo, 1988; Kostova & Roth, 2003). However Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) introduce the broader concept of Professional Capital when specifically considering Education Networks which includes three types of capital: social capital, human capital and decisional capital. These ideas are expanded upon, further into this literature review.

Governance. Another lens with which to examine the broad concept of networks is that of Governance which focuses on the operating and decision-making processes. Sorensen and Torfing (2005, p. 195) see governance as the “negotiated interaction of a plurality of public, semi-public and private actors”. Rhodes (2007, p. 1246) refers to governance as the “changed condition of ordered rule; or new method by which society is governed”. Rhodes (2007, p. 1245) explains that organisations depend on other organisations for resources to achieve their goals. He emphasises the game-like nature of interchanges by competing interests.

From the perspective of public service structures and hierarchies, governance encompasses the changing lines between the public, private and voluntary sectors and the ways that these sectors interact through networks; these networks are termed

governance networks. Because such networks are generally seen to be self-organising, their interactions are founded in trust, relationships and there is a significant degree of autonomy. Rhodes (1996) identifies key aspects of governance as being about: interdependence between organisations and changes to the boundaries between public, private and voluntary actors. Bang and Sorensen (1999) emphasise that the governance of networks needs to be bottom up because central intervention undermines autonomy. They see the “various networks of governance crossing all established boundaries between levels of government (local, national and international), between public and private and between state and civil society” (p.329).

When considering the influences on public sector governance and factors that impact on networks at that level, Moore and Khagram's strategic triangle (Moore & Khagram, 2004), sets out the parameters for creating public value, providing an important framework for putting into perspective the influences and buy-in of stakeholders. The notion of public value relates to the investment by government into structures and processes that are seen to achieve their purposes as effectively as possible, by stakeholders.

Therefore the idea of public value can be evaluated by the level of satisfaction of stakeholders who may be customers or other kinds of actors within government services. In the example of networks of government schools such as Regional Networks that were expected to collaborate within a district to achieve the government's goals for education, the stakeholders were principals and their communities at one end and the system at the other. Principals as stakeholders needed to see purpose and value in their involvement before they committed their allegiance.

The interplay of the three areas of public value, operational capability and legitimacy and support, represents the complex relationship within network structures that depend on the delicate balance between what is seen to be of value by the actors in a network and their power to determine outcomes through the support of their allegiance. Moore and Khagram's framework (2004) is applied by the researcher to reflect the governance structure of Regional Networks, in which the key issue of public value is explored in relation to the stakeholders, who are at opposite ends of the spectrum.

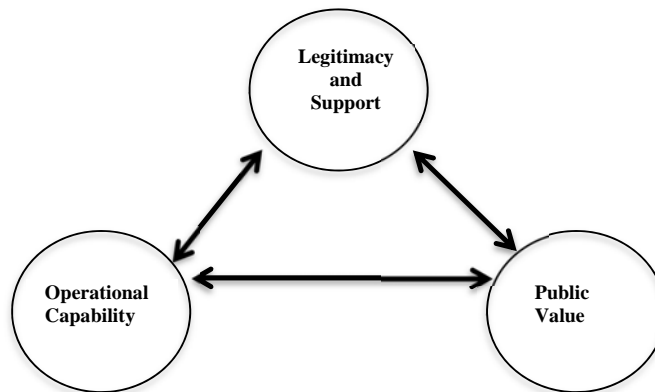


Figure 4. Strategic Triangle (Moore & Khagram, 2004, p.3).

Both the principals who were members of the Regional Networks, and the DEECD, who commissioned the structure on behalf of the system, were stakeholders in this arrangement. Rhodes' (2007) perspective of local networks is that if they are managed vertically rather than horizontally, there is a danger of them losing their identity because the hierarchy of central management changes the nature of the relationship. For Rhodes (2007) such relationships then become exercises in consultation because the power relationship has changed. Regional Networks

displayed aspects of both vertical and horizontal management and for this reason the concept of perceived public value was important to give credibility to the structure from the perception of its members.

Having framed the importance of the conceptual frameworks of Systems Thinking, Social Capital, and Governance within organisational networks, three broad categories of network are now outlined. The purpose for doing this is to place the definition of the Regional Network within this context. The categories of networks to be outlined are Corporate and Inter-organisational Networks (Gulati, 1998; Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Jarillo, 1988); International Networks (Church et al., 2003); and Education Networks (Hargreaves, 2003; Hopkins, 2007). When looking specifically at features of Regional Networks influences on the governance arrangements distinctive to these networks, will be reiterated.

Corporate and Inter-Organisational Networks

Corporate and Inter-organisational Networks are regarded as “strategic alliances, voluntary arrangements between firms involving exchange, sharing or co-development of technology or services” (Gulati, 1998, p. 294). Relationships are a key aspect of such alliances (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005). Membership of a network, and the resulting exchange relationships, facilitate knowledge acquisition. Gulati, Nohria and Zaheer (2000, p. 203) define networks as being “composed of inter-organisational ties that are enduring and of strategic significance for those entering into them”. A key characteristic of networks is the “repeated and enduring exchange” (Podolny & Page, 1998, p. 59) relationships between members of the network.

Starkey, Ellis, Hine and Terna (2002) and Karl et al. (1999) in discussing networks as an organisational concept, concur that a network is a network only when the relationships entered into by the participants are voluntary, remain autonomous and involve mutually beneficial activities. The markers of a network are about relationships, power and action. Relationships are a key aspect of strategic alliances (Gulati et al., 2000; Inkpen & Tsang, 2005). Membership of a network and the resulting interactions through the relationships that have been cemented, facilitate knowledge acquisition.

International Networks

Consideration of International Networks, adds to a broad understanding of the important elements of effective networks, such as participation and trust. The nature of International Networks is distinguished as being committed to working for social justice and human rights. From this perspective they are similar to Education Networks as both have altruistic goals. International Networks connect varied groups of people from many countries and at many levels. Those involved participate because of their commitment to a shared purpose. However participants come together as independent decision-makers who are connected through their shared values. It is “the linked nature of the work and the quality of the participation” (Church et al., 2002, p.5) that allows this kind of network to be effective.

In such networks people participate through a commitment to a shared purpose as autonomous decision-making agents, connected by shared values. It is the linked nature of the work and the quality of the participation that gives this type of network its power. Through collaboration, ideas about how the network should operate are brought to the table. These include ideas about relationship, trust,

structure, participation and reflection and how they relate to the network form. Too tight a structure in the view of Church et al. (2003) that is too many rules, can strangle creativity but too loose a structure can lead to confusion. Starkey et al. (2002, p. 5) emphasise the importance of “local formal or informal networks that bring people together who would not be otherwise linked and involve them in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation”, in discussing the setting up of rural transport networks in isolated areas.

Church et al. (2003) also emphasise the fundamental importance of relationships between diverse people in the network. It is what binds the network together; relationships are the essence of the network. Relationships become powerful as trust grows through acting together on common interests and shared values. Clarity of purpose through common interests and shared values ensures that participants know what to expect and what they can offer.

Church et al. (2002, p.19) in clarifying the substance of networks as relational, use the analogy of “threads, knots and nets”, as the structure of a network. The “threads” give the network life through linking participants through communication, friendship, shared ideas. This analogy builds on the initial concept of Manuel Castells (2000, p.697) in which networks are seen as a set of inter-connecting “nodes” and Karl (1997) who uses the fishing net-type structure to represent networks as diagrams.

Network structures in the field of International Networks, Church et al. (2003) note, tend to have a coordination centre and a management or representative committee. The balance between having some rules, regulations or protocols and allowing the network members to interact in an unconstrained manner, is important to the effectiveness of the network. Church et al. (2003) discuss the important work

of the role of a coordinator or facilitator who is constantly engaged with members, facilitating their interactions and helping build the connections. From this perspective this type of network is similar to the Regional Network structure, yet to be explored.

Church et al. (2003), while focusing on the work of International Networks, present a valuable piece of research that adds to an understanding of the important features of effective networks, providing recommendations for empowerment of members, monitoring and evaluation of activities that can be applied to other network types such as Education Networks. For example, the nature of participation appears to be a key feature of all the networks discussed. This is emphasised by both Veugelers and Zijlstra (2002) in outlining The Netherlands' experience of Education Networks and Mullen and Kochan (2000) in discussing the achievements of the West Alabama Learning Coalition which are presented later in the literature.

Education Networks

The collaboration of schools in networks is increasingly acknowledged as an important means of improving education but the language for describing Education Networks is varied and diverse. Education Networks have been described as school networks, networked learning communities, learning networks (Earl & Katz, 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hopkins, 2007; Wohlstetter, Malloy, Cahu, & Polhemus, 2003); school districts (Fuhrman & Elmore, 2004); school families, (Fullan, 2000); coalitions (Mullen & Kochan, 2000); alliances, collaboratives (Hopkins, 2007); and Regional Networks (Butler, 2014; Griffin et al., 2010). However in spite of variations in name and structure, it is possible to draw out common features, of which knowledge sharing, is at the forefront. Hargreaves (2003)

sees a key aspect of collaboration, even though networks are both varied and diverse in structure and name, as creating opportunities in which knowledge and practice can be shared. Fullan (2003) concurs, being a strong advocate of networks as a means of building capacity; he sees their prime value in disseminating improvement in teacher practice through collaborative skill building. He stresses that “to realise this vision, there must be lateral development, that is people at one’s own level giving and receiving help in effect building capacity and shared commitment across schools” (Fullan, 2003, p.47).

Senge’s (2006) framework of Systems Thinking previously introduced, is relevant in the context of team building which is so critical to the effectiveness of Education Networks. Senge distinguishes team learning as a very specific form of learning that allows for rigorous exchange of ideas in a respectful and supportive environment. “When teams are truly learning, not only are they producing extraordinary results, but individual members are growing more rapidly” (Senge, 2006, p.9). The importance of “Dialogue” leads to “thinking together” (Senge, 2006, p. 10). Senge refers here to the Greek definition of discussion in which ideas are heaved back and forward. Senge believes that unless teams can learn, organisations cannot learn. Thus learning exchange is the essential component of capacity building in Education Networks. This point is strongly confirmed by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) who argue that Social Capital, as a key driver of Education Networks, is not enough. The broader concept of Professional Capital, that is introduced and previously referred to in the literature review when discussing social capital as an essential and unifying concept of organisational networks, includes three types of capital: social capital, human capital and decisional capital. Human capital is about the talent and skills of a group when working collaboratively. Investment in high-

quality teachers, who are well-networked and committed to self-improvement, will generate the social capital that is the hallmark of an education effective system. Decisional capital, the third aspect of Professional Capital, is about having the professionalism and capability to make decisions in complex situations, exercising judgment and insight with collective responsibility.

While Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) see the building of the capacity of the teaching workforce in terms of the accumulation of professional capital, English and Ehrich (2016) bring an interesting and not unrelated perspective to these ideas through their exploration of *connoisseurship* in educational leadership. *Connoisseurship* is about using skills of expertise across all forms of human endeavour, having enhanced perceptions to understand the right course of action in any context; it is linked to both knowledge and power. In building the concept of *connoisseurship*, English and Ehrich (2016) interviewed artists and educational leaders who have developed skills beyond those understood to be standard leadership practice, in an effort to understand the distinct ways of approaching their work. The difference between the two groups was discerned to be that artists regarded the challenges of dealing with limitations as part of the creative process while school leaders saw such constraints as inhibiting their work. English and Ehrich (2016) explain the phenomenon of surpassing standard managerial practice as the embracing of *connoisseurship*. Therefore, through the idea of *connoisseurship*, a challenge is posed to the traditional educational leadership tools of trade because the term *connoisseurship* is usually a term referred to in management studies (John, 1995). English and Ehrich (2016) in exploring 10 dimensions of *connoisseurship*, define it as a process or continuum of developmental stages. The 10 dimensions are briefly outlined as follows:

1. a knowledgeable perception, having a 'discerning eye'
2. experience; it takes years to develop a body of knowledge
3. competence, the need to be technically proficient
4. the ability to frame insights and choose the appropriate course
5. a desire and passion for learning
6. a strong sense of the links between theory and practice
7. an aesthetic vision beyond just the technical; a sense of moral purpose
8. cultural awareness and reflexivity, being able to see beyond one's own culture and situation
9. personal discipline, a strong work ethic
10. strong sense of one's own identity, self-confidence and self-efficacy

These capabilities align strongly with Hargreaves and Fullan's explanation of human, social and decisional capital as the key components of professional capital, which also demand a culture of lifelong learning, passionate work ethic, self-confidence and moral purpose. In connoisseurship, the quest for increased competence can break through the barriers of limitations by utilising creativity to find solutions that enable "Leading Beautifully" - the phrase that assumes the title of the book which explores the dimensions of connoisseurship (English & Ehrich, 2015).

With regard to governance, Moore and Khagram (2004, p. 3) in expanding on the concept of public value as a legitimising aspect of government agencies and departments previously referred to, argue that the goal of government managers is to "create public (social) value" in the same way that private managers create economic value through trading their goods and services in markets. Stakeholders need to see value in the work of public organisations if they are to give their support. When

looking specifically at the governance of Regional Networks later in this literature review, the work of Moore and Khagram (2004) is referred to again, in relation to how components of their strategic triangle model impact on the operations and mandate for decision-making in the Regional Network context. Figure 5 shows how the frameworks of Systems Thinking (Senge, 2006), Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) and Governance (Moore & Khagram, 2004) are essential and interrelated components of Education Networks.

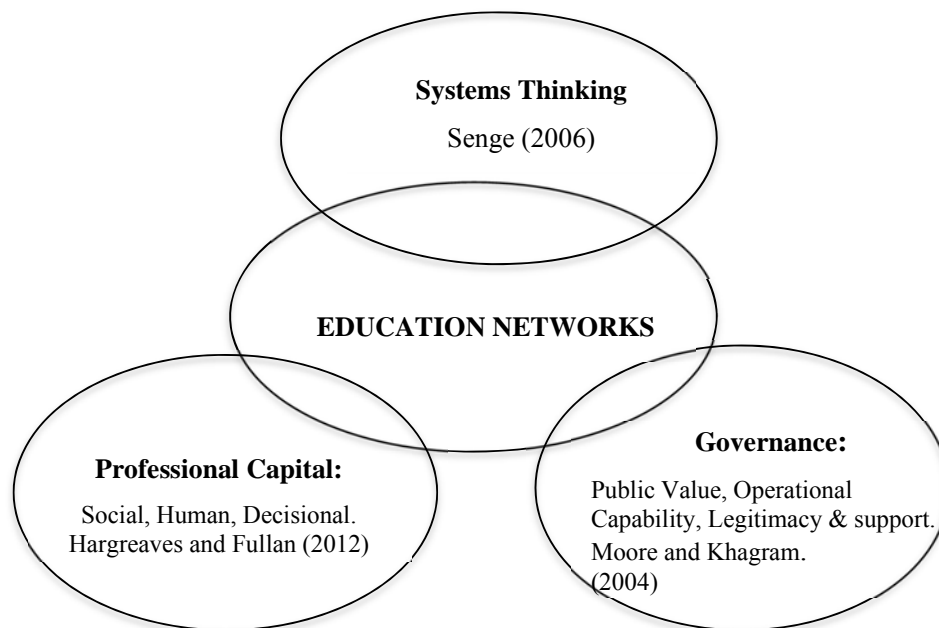


Figure 5. Conceptual framework for examining Education Networks.

Major Educational Network Theorists

Schools working together building both their own capacity and sharing innovation and expertise play an important role in the evolution of Hopkins' thinking in relation to the role that networks can play in system-wide improvement (Hopkins, 1990; Hopkins & Ainscow, 1993; Hopkins & Harris, 1997; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001). Hopkins (2007, p. 131) defines networks within the educational context as

“purposeful social entities characterised by a commitment to quality, rigor, and a focus on standards and student learning”. He outlines a typology of networks on a five-point hierarchy that is presented in the table below. This continuum confirms educational networks as vehicles to foster the professional development of teachers and support capacity building in schools because they bring together and work with the diverse elements of the system and “mediate between centralised and decentralised structures” (Hopkins, 2007, p. 131).

Table 1

Hopkins (2007) Typology of Networks

Level 5 (highest)	Networks are explicit agents of system renewal or transformation
Level 4	Groups inside and outside education work together for system improvement with regard to social justice and inclusion
Level 3	Stake holders join together to implement specific policies
Level 2	Teachers share knowledge to achieve an explicit school improvement goal to lift achievement across a school or group of schools
Level 1 (basic)	Teachers share knowledge.

However Hopkins (2007) warns that Education Networks are designed to support rather than challenge the current system and can be a vehicle for embedding the policy of the day. This was true of the Regional Network structure and the rationale (DEECD, 2010) which was to improve student outcomes across the system. Hopkins (2007) identifies collaboration; building capacity and support; focus and purpose; shared leadership; accountability; relationships; enquiry, as the key elements of Education Networks. In reinforcing the importance of collaboration, Fullan (2000) argues that schools should not work alone but connect with others in the district to reinforce alignment. In this regard he is a strong advocate of networks

as a means of building capacity, and sees their value in disseminating improvement in teacher practice through collaborative skill building.

Chapman and Hadfield (2010) agree that networks do share common features and argue that these features give them agency and purpose. Networks require a structure that will facilitate school-to-school collaboration so that interactions between schools are regular and purposeful. The processes that feature in school networks, as opposed to solely social networks, will be a range of shared learning experiences, professional development activities and joint planning, as in the example of curriculum innovation. The feature of agency and purpose is further developed in the phrase, *networked agency*, as an essential component of a professional network (Chapman & Hadfield, 2010). This is explained as a shared commitment and collective action such as schools working together on a common literacy improvement plan with specific goals to improve the literacy levels of a group of students within a stated timeframe. The idea of networked agency is put in different terms by Wohlstetter, Malloy, Cahu and Polhemus (2003), when referring to the strength of Education Networks lying in their collective capacity as a group of organisations, working together to solve problems or issues of mutual concern. This supports the example given above of the literacy improvement plan strategy which also links to the concept of Professional Capital previously outlined (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Hopkins (2007, p.131-132) corroborates this stance emphasising that for system-organised groups of schools to be effective as agents of educational change they need “consistency of values and focus”; “clarity of structure”; “knowledge creation, utilisation and transfer”; “rewards related to learning”; “dispersed leadership and empowerment”; and “adequate resources”.

The features listed by Hopkins (2007) above, are critical to successful networks and are echoed by other researchers who may use different language to express similar ideas (Chapman & Hadfield, 2010; Church et al., 2002; de Lima, 2010; Earl & Katz, 2006; Fullan, 2000, 2003). Another essential point about effective networks is that they cannot be mandated and accordingly, Veugelers and Zijlstra (2002) reiterate that networks are influential only if they are not directly connected with educational change and are free to influence and lobby government policy. A description of the important role played by the Amsterdam Network of Schools follows shortly, in the section dealing with examples of effective Education Networks.

However, when networks are tools of the system and engineered to affect educational change, members of such networks do not have the freedom to criticise or influence policy without personal repercussions. As individuals they are vulnerable and that is why Veugelers and Zijlstra (2002) emphasise the importance of networks not being directly connected with educational change. It is important to recognise the limitations of these structures and the vulnerabilities of individual members if they are seen as not to comply with expectations. Riley (2015) while reporting on the results of a five-year longitudinal study into Australian principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing, found that one of the increased sources of stress was Government initiatives. The Regional Network structure was a vehicle specifically introduced to facilitate the implementation of such initiatives and there was an expectation that principals were actively involved, rendering them vulnerable if they chose not to do so.

The vulnerability of individuals within a system has been illustrated in the stories of wounded leaders (Ackerman & Malsin-Ostrowski, 2002) which highlight

the emotional toll that a lack of affirmation and recognition of the complex work of principals, can take. The inability to meet a system's arbitrary expectations without accounting for individual factors, can lead to feelings of alienation and wounding. The work of Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) in the field of wounded leaders will be further addressed in Chapter 7 when discussing the thematic analysis of principals' perceptions of regional networks in consideration of theme 2d. *Lack of recognition and affirmation.*

The ability of networks to connect schools is highlighted by Earl and Katz (2006, p. 2) in their report for the National College of School Leadership, "Networks and professional learning communities of teachers, principal, schools, and even districts have become a pervasive mechanism in education for reaching beyond traditional boundaries." This reference relates to the Networked Learning Communities Programme and acknowledges that the initiative arose out of knowledge-creation theories of learning such as envisioned by Hargreaves (2003). Hargreaves advocated that teachers and school leaders need to visibly share their knowledge with others in the system so that new professional knowledge is created and generated through the system.

Examples of Effective Education Networks

The common features of networks that have been previously identified are: knowledge exchange; shared purpose and commitment to common goals; agency through a shared commitment to action; collaborative culture and relationships that are based on a sense of trust; clear accountabilities; voluntary membership; a sense of ownership by network members; and shared leadership. These features are demonstrated in the examples of Education Networks presented and should be kept

in mind when considering the structure and definition of the Regional Network. The examples have also been chosen because they span different countries (United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Canada and the United States) and demonstrate that the broad features of networks are not location-specific, even though each individual network will have its own distinct flavour.

1. The Amsterdam Network of Schools. Since 1998 the Center for Professional Development in Education at the University of Amsterdam (Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2002) worked closely with schools to create the Senior Secondary Education School Network. Teachers and principals learn from one another collaborating in many ways for school improvement. Teacher educators from the university stimulate and structure the interactions of the network, working with teachers on action research and bringing their expertise to the table. Networks are the vehicles for facilitating this learning.

In The Netherlands nearly 70% of the 450 schools for upper secondary education participate in networks such as this one (Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2002). Networking developed in the late 1980s out of concerns about secondary education where students were not motivated, school was seen to be inflexible and there was no smooth transition from secondary school to university. As a result the study house (Bandura, 1995) initiative was introduced. This approach introduced independence and self-regulation in learning. In study house, teachers' schedules included lessons, coaching and mentoring. Teachers were required to collaborate more both in and across areas of the school, discussing planning, assessment and pedagogy. The Amsterdam Network assists schools to develop and implement study house strategies.

The structure of the Amsterdam Network involved 32 schools grouped into four smaller networks. Staff from the centre for Professional Development in Education work with the networks and act as Chair; they work closely with a representative group of members to plan activities and meetings. Members are surveyed about their needs to ensure meaningful sessions are planned. Functions of the network are critical to its effectiveness and these have included: interpretation and influencing of government policies; shared learning; using each other's expertise; developing educational approaches and material; participation.

The network is associated mainly with active participation and meetings characterised by equality amongst participants; discussion is practical with a focus on finding solutions. This is contrary to traditional forms of teacher education, which are passive. Communication to the network is both formal and informal, including face-to-face sessions and email. The effectiveness of the network is assessed by participants who are surveyed. Participation by the membership is seen as vital. Through participation policy can be de-constructed and given a new perspective. In a survey on network functions, respondents valued two aspects above all; learning from each other, and using each other's expertise. There is a climate of collaboration and sharing. Practice is openly discussed and the agenda is shared and owned by participants. Veugelers and Zijlstra (2002, p. 172) in discussing diversity in networks believe that networks should show similarities and differences; however those differences can cause "bottlenecks" if too extreme, as the business of the group is impeded. The differences should be within the boundaries of common concern where dialogue is stimulated between those different perspectives.

To draw out generalities from the Amsterdam Network, for the purpose of clarifying broader features of Education Networks as a structure, Veugelers and

Zijlstra (2002) highlight the importance of shared learning experiences as a key function of the network. They also stress that a network needs to be constructed by the members; that is participation is voluntary and that networks need to have clear common goals and flexibility in structure.

2. West Alabama Learning Coalition. Mullen and Kochan (2000) investigated the West Alabama Learning Coalition (WALC), a multi-organisational institution in rural Alabama. WALC is an interdependent collective of six Professional Development School (PDS) partnerships proposed by The Holmes Group (1990) to link schools to universities. Common goals of the partnerships are to improve education for schools and pre-service teachers and to create opportunities for collaborative learning while also conducting research.

Features of the WALC are its diverse and regional membership. There is a shared leadership structure and each partner leads a team on their home site. The home teams form the catalysts for change. As part of the shared leadership and responsibility, members evaluate each meeting rating the best aspects and those requiring improvement. Members meet twice a year to learn from each other at two-day conferences, which include both formal presentations and informal exchanges. Cultural and social outings are also included.

The study focused on the factors that motivated the members of WALC to initially join the network and what motivated them to remain involved. These two questions were then expanded into 15 interview questions around these two main points. This research drew on the work of Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) in identifying successful features of teacher networks, and the work of Firestone and Pennell (1997) around expanded feelings of empowerment fostered through such connections. The findings of the research revealed consistent themes around synergy

between personal goals and those of the coalition, shared leadership and a sense of empowerment. "Within the WALC partnership, the interplay between synergy and empowerment appeared to have created conditions for transformation the impact of which cut across personal, organisational and relations." (Mullen & Kochan, 2000, p. 195)

The structure of WALC was described by its members as a spider's web, "the spider, creating and re-creating the web/network" (p. 195). Using this analogy, reminiscent of Karl's representation of a network (Church et al., 2002), the coalition sees itself constructed of loosely connected components held together by the experience of its members. Each component is both weak and strong; resilient as part of the inter-connected whole. The researchers conclude that the coalition can be understood as an organic process of change and evolution as the people and the network are in the process of developing and growing.

Case studies such as this, add to the understanding and knowledge of the key elements of the successful networks being considered throughout this literature review. These are collective sense of purpose, shared learning, shared leadership and voluntary membership.

3. The Knowsley Collaboratives, Liverpool. In England, Leadbeater, Gillinsen and Green (2005) give the examples of collaboration among primary schools in Knowsley. Schools have been grouped into three networks of around 25 schools each, led by a facilitator appointed by each network from within its ranks. The Local Education Authority acts as a co-leader in an advisory capacity. Leadbeater et al., (2005, p. 22) identify a number of benefits that are characteristic of collaboratives such as Knowsley's. These include a reduction of duplication, resources can be channelled to the schools that need most support, shared practices

and the spread of innovation, improved transition processes to secondary school, a shared sense of direction whilst maintaining the clear identity of each participating school. Participants collaborate informally between formal monthly meetings, leadership is shared among a small group of people, joint targets are set, budgets are pooled for bigger projects that will benefit all schools and co-created products and services are generated through the creative professional interactions which lead to more effective personalised learning for students.

The power of collaboration that is emphasised (Leadbeater et al., 2005) refers back to the concept of a learning organisation (Senge, 2006) as an essential component of system-wide improvement. The importance of working together especially when schools are small is stressed; pooling knowledge and resources is critical. While the small nature of most primary schools can be regarded as an advantage because of their intimate environment, such schools often lack access to the range of specialist expertise because of their limited resources. Collaboration offers the way out of this dilemma. Examples such as the Knowsley Collaboratives are not isolated. Similar structures of networks of schools coming together to improve the learning of students in a district can be seen widely across England and North America. Leadbeater et al. (2005, p. 22) see collaboration and networks, as essential components of system improvement as they look towards education in 2020. "The Collaborative provides a mechanism for emerging practices to be shared, making it easier to spread the benefits to all school."

4. York District, Ontario. Fullan (2010, p. 43) outlines the achievements of the York District School Board (YRDSB) stressing the combination of strategies of moral purpose, capacity building, and a strong sense of partnership between the district and schools, across schools and between schools and the community. Fullan

elaborates that “a visitor can go into any one of the 182 schools in YRDSB and have similar conversations – the language of focused instruction is ubiquitous” (p.43). Based on the York school improvement experience, Fullan describes the characteristics of an effective school district. At the top of the list is clear direction and relentless focus on student achievement. Another important feature is the collective sense of identity among principals and teachers and between schools and the district. Strategies include scaffolding capacity building in the district and networks of schools, the individual school and community level.

In 2010, the York region remained a large multicultural urban district that formed part of the Greater Toronto Area, with 130,000 students, 8,800 teachers and 192 schools. Despite being one of the largest, most diverse districts, it is one of the best performing districts. It raised achievement scores across six provincial measures of reading writing and mathematics for Grades 3 and 6 by 15% over the past five years, along with increasing its Grade 10 literacy scores and its high school graduation rates (Fullan, 2010). When progress seemed to plateau after a couple of years, the York District School Board stayed resolute and deepened the course. In 2009, when scores jumped up again, the excitement around the district was palpable. Results were evidenced at both the individual school level and district level. Crosby Heights is a K-8 school of 662 students. The principal on arrival five years earlier found no common focus, critical parents and an unsafe school environment. With high expectations and careful and strategic capacity building through connecting with other schools in the district, in three years the school demonstrated dramatic improvement. On district-wide tests conducted by the independent Education Quality and Accountability Office in 2009, in three years reading scores went from 44% to 90%, reaching the district standard; writing went from 40% to 87% and Mathematics

went from 50% to 83% in the same cohort of students from Year 3 to Year 6 (Fullan, 2010).

Similar success was evident at Armadale Public School, which was the district's largest elementary school with a population of 80% Tamil students. This included a continuous influx of students arriving without English. The school focused on the students at risk. In one year that number was reduced from 378 to 233, in each of the nine grade levels. In one year (2008 to 2009) Year 3 reading improved from 63% proficient to 84%, writing went from 75% to 91% and Mathematics went from 76% to 89%. Fullan continues to make the point that these schools are not atypical (Fullan, 2006, p. 47).

Fullan (2003) advocates local capacity building through collaborative skill building to build system-wide improvement, stressing that improvement cannot only come from the top. Vision, policy incentives, mechanisms for interaction, coordination and monitoring emanate from the top, but there must be lateral development; that is people at the local level working together to achieve common goals.

Having presented four examples of collaboration between schools through networks, it can be argued that Education Networks are different from other types of networks because of their members' strong sense of moral purpose in striving to improve educational outcomes for students (Fullan, 2003; Hopkins, 2007; Sergiovanni, 1992). Looking at the core work of Education Networks their goals are altruistic. While this can also be said of some other types of networks, such as International Networks (Church et al., 2004), Education Networks ultimately all have the same goal of improving educational opportunities for students. By working together, schools in the network can enhance the improvement potential of each

school. Relationships and interactions within Education Networks are not primarily for personal, social or economic advantage.

Victorian Regional Networks

The Regional Network structure as outlined in the first chapter, was introduced in October 2008 when all the schools in the Victorian government system were allocated a place in the new structure. For many schools the membership to the new school groupings did not change from what was previously in place; for other schools who were on the fringe of a district, it meant joining a new group. The reason for this was that the new Regional Networks should all be of approximately the same size. As the new Regional Network Leader (RNL) role was to drive the school improvement agenda handed down from the centre, it was decided by central leadership that all RNLs should have a similar number of schools to manage.

In considering the governance structure of Regional Networks, Moore and Khagram's (2004) strategic triangle of governance, when applied to this structure, captures the complexities related to competing and parallel interest groups. The Regional Network Executive gained its authority through perceived public value, which in turn fostered operational capability, legitimacy and support, from policy (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007a, 2010) at the macro level; from its member principals at the meso level; and local stakeholders at the micro level. At each level the dominant authorising influence was impacted upon by the perceived public value that was generated by the network's activities. The subtleties of the interplay between perceived and actual authority could vary in influence depending on the issue, combined with the nature and power of the lobby group.

When network members perceived the network as satisfying their needs, the elements of the triangle were in balance and facilitated smooth operation of the network governance structure. In cases where members supported network meetings they valued the collegiality and professional support that was provided. The perceived public value was present and facilitated the smooth operations of the network. This resulted from the allegiance and loyalty that was given to the Executive by the membership. In such cases, the Executive had the mandate of its members. However, in other situations public value was diminished. This occurred in situations when a directive was imposed on the Executive by the system that members did not agree with such as mandated membership or the compliance exercise of writing a network strategic plan. In these situations the lines of communication between the three components of the triangle - public value; legitimacy and support, and operational capability (Moore & Khagram, 2004) - were disrupted. Members could either pay lip service to the process or openly oppose it. Either way an imbalance in the strategic triangle was the result. The loss of the perceived public value of network membership by aggrieved members impacted, in such cases, by lessening the power of the operational capability. The overall effectiveness of the network was weakened as a result.

Structural problems with Regional Networks. Although network terminology was used to define Regional Networks, key aspects of the structure were problematic and did not align with the features of networks identified in the literature as definitive. These defining features are: a focus on common goals (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001); shared ownership (Hadfield et al. 2006); voluntary membership (Hopkins, 2008); distributed leadership (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012); learning interchange (Hadfield et al. 2006; Fullan, 2006); shared resources (Chapman &

Hadfield, 2010; Fullan, 2003; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012); and intrinsic rewards (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001). Regional Networks fall short in the following areas:

Voluntary membership and Distributed Leadership. Membership of networks was mandated by the system. The RNL was the line manager of the principals in the network. Therefore RNLs were an agent of, and, spokesperson for the system; a conduit for policy implementation (DEECD, 2010). Although the Executive of the Regional Network comprised of principal members, the agenda was driven by the system.

Network size. The Regional Network structure was mandated from the central office to keeping all networks approximately the same size (25 schools) as a central, and limiting factor (DEECD, 2010).

Learning interchange. A typology of networks on a five-point hierarchy has been outlined by network theorist David Hopkins (Hopkins, 2007). At the simplest level networks encourage the sharing of good practice. At their best, they can transform the system. In Victoria a Level 4 network model was mandated (DEECD, 2010). It did not grow out of the needs of its members and did not develop from Level 1 – 4.

The following diagram set out the way in which Regional Networks fit into the broader concept of Education Networks, even though some of their features vary from those generally seen in Education Networks.

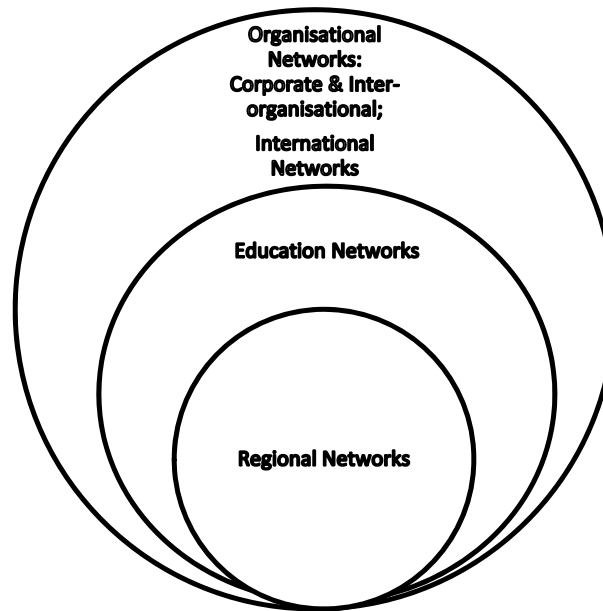


Figure 6. Regional Networks within the broader concept of networks.

Previous research into Victorian Regional Networks. There were only three studies that considered Regional Networks. However the foci of these studies varied and covered broader aspects of system leadership. The first study (Butler, 2014) focussed on the school improvement agenda (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007a) *Blueprint and Flagship Strategies for Victorian Government Schools 2003 and 2008*, of which the Regional Network was one element. Butler's research (2014) showed that by "bringing agency to undertake system priorities closer to the school level, Regional Networks support schools in undertaking school improvement journeys" (p.287). Butler's research found that the Victorian system, at the time, had a clear narrative and widely held belief that system leadership roles could and would lead to school improvement. The Regional Network initiative that was introduced in order to use mid-level leadership as leverage for system improvement, showed evidence that RNLs as these mid-level leaders, undertook roles and performed actions such as

leadership capacity-building, coaching and generating collaboration, which were acknowledged as typical of school improvement efforts. However, the way in which this work was perceived by members of Regional Networks was not investigated.

The second study was commissioned by the Department of Education and Early Childhood prior to the change in government (Griffin et al., 2010). Because of the shortened lifespan of Regional Networks this research was cut short and only two years of data could be used although the initial intention was to conduct a longitudinal study spanning five years as Regional Network Leaders were contracted for that period. In analysis of the aspects of research into improved student outcomes, there was no systematic positive effect of networks evidenced in this research. The report (Griffin et al., 2010) investigated how Regional Networks supported school improvement activities from 2010 to 2011. This study was initially intended to be a longitudinal one, tracking the data on Regional Networks over five years. The quantitative nature of the research design did not have as its focus, the lived experiences of members of the network.

Results indicated that principals valued the support for data dissemination and interpretation by RNLs; sharing data between network schools to inform teaching practice; opportunities to build leadership capacity; professional learning opportunities to build teacher capacity and that networks provided both leadership and mentoring/support for principals, with RNLs acting as 'critical friends'. With regard to principals roles within networks most ($\approx 90\%$) principals expressed positive views about their own contributions to networks; $\approx 25\%$ took active leadership roles within a relatively horizontal management structure; there was a strong link between school size and likelihood of principals taking network leadership positions. Where principals took a negative view this was largely

explained by either school management issues, or dissatisfaction with poor network collegiality or leadership (Griffin et al., 2010).

In analysis of improved student outcomes in the Griffin et al. (2010) study there was no systematic effect of networks; equity effects are within grade level; potential impact of the network is minimal. In this regard, however, the short time frame for the available data involving improved student outcomes needs to be considered. As these networks began late in 2008 would one expect to see growth in student outcomes in such a short time, keeping in mind the need for networks to mature, build trust and develop their improvement plans? It may be quite unrealistic to expect to see this change filter through to classrooms so quickly. As mentioned, Butler's research (2013) did reveal the beginnings of significant change in student outcomes in Northern region networks.

It is interesting to note the principals' views of the impact of the network on teaching and learning in the Griffin et al. (2010) study. Most principals acknowledged a link between network participation and improvements in teaching and learning at their school and the role of the RNL was described as pivotal—leadership in data dissemination and interpretation; facilitating professional learning and collegiality; mentoring new principals; and network administration. Network support was less valued by principals of some special education and secondary schools – they sought collegial support from principals of similar schools. This point of commonality was also identified in Butler's research (2014) when describing the variance between types of schools in the network.

In summarising Griffin's research (Griffin et al., 2010), findings indicate that the majority of principals expressed support for the network model, although there was no systematic 'network effect' for support or participation. Both network

support and participation were linked to school type, size, and perceptions of need. Capacity to participate in networks was affected by school size and availability of senior staff to take leadership roles within the school. There was no evidence of a network-based impact on student outcomes beyond that expected from the growth that occurs as students mature. This finding aligns with the work of Hadfield et al. (2006) in considering the question of whether networks have an impact and what that impact is. Hadfield et al. (2006) reviewed almost 100 articles and reports from a reading of around 200 documents and define networks as, “groups or systems of interconnected people and organisations (including schools) whose aims and purposes include the improvement of learning and aspects of wellbeing known to affect learning” (p.1). While there has been a great deal of activity and interest in the potential of networking and collaboration, there has been little substantiation of the effects, to date.

Griffin's report (Griffin et al. 2010) makes some interesting recommendations that echo the evidence from the studies that Hadfield et al. (2006) reviewed regarding the effectiveness of a broad number of education network structures in improving student outcomes. Griffin's recommendations, which are based on limited data, nevertheless suggest that a different structure of school groupings would be more appropriate, including cognate clusters of schools; increased emphasis on student learning outcomes – literacy, numeracy, and specialist areas; multiple group membership of networks; and a change from an external leader (RNL) to facilitator and resource person. This recommendation for the replacement of the RNL by a facilitator or resource person can be interpreted as referring to the conflicted role of the RNL in representing both the network and the system.

The third study (Hopkins, Munro and Craig, 2011) considers the influence of Regional Networks in supporting the school improvement initiative of Action Improvement Zones (Aiz) in Northern Metropolitan Region (NMR) Victoria. Without specifically focusing on the Regional Network structure, it considers Regional Networks as an important aspect of the school improvement success story of the region. Hopkins et al. (2011) give their account of Action Improvement Zones (AiZ) as a regional improvement strategy to lift student outcomes in NMR schools over the period that embraced the structure of Regional Networks. The NMR consists of 195 schools: 137 primary, 36 secondary, 13 special, seven p-12, one P-9 and one 10-12 school, that are organised into eight Regional Networks which take into their net 75,000 students. The AiZ strategy involved both school improvement strategies and pedagogic skill building. School learning leaders were charged with building the literacy and numeracy skills and assessment practices within their schools. Professional learning teams within schools formed part of larger professional learning teams within the Regional Networks. In this way NMR schools used as their rationale both the frameworks of system thinking-learning organisations (Senge, 2006); and Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), that have been previously discussed in the literature review.

All NMR schools were involved in the project but implementation was staged over three phases. NMR schools faced significant socio-economic disadvantage but regional leaders concerned about the “endemic low levels of student achievement” (Hopkins et al. 2011, pp. 2-3) and believing this could not be solely attributed to socio-economic disadvantage, invited education experts David Hopkins and John Munro to intervene. The implementation of the Aiz program, based on a similar approach in the U.K. known as Education Action Zones (EAZ),

was the outcome of this intervention. In outlining the roll-out of the AiZ strategy, the important role that Regional Networks played in building pedagogic knowledge and skills in teachers and school leaders is credited.

The networks are the agencies for the region's strong school improvement agenda. Regional Network Leaders supported by principals from the network, lead implementation of the network annual implementation plan, which outlines the priorities for action. (Hopkins et al. 2011, p. 2)

Within the AiZ initiative, the phrase, "Powerful Learning" is used as an umbrella term (p. 7) by Hopkins et al. (2011), who highlight the strength of the moral purpose that was generated in the endeavours to create conditions where every child could reach their potential. This was to be achieved by lifting the capacity of the teaching workforce both within an individual school and within a district. The importance of collective knowledge sharing and its role in the educational transformation process echoes the continuum of network maturity outlined (Hopkins, 2007) earlier in literature review. System transformation cannot be achieved through the ad hoc improvement of individual schools, as each school is an interdependent cog in the system. The combination of "top down and bottom up" strategies (Hopkins, 2007) is explained as intertwining policy implementation driven by system leaders with building the capacity of the workforce at the local level, through collaboration. Within this context Regional Networks play a role in which "system-level structures are established that link together various levels of the system and promote disciplined innovation as a consequence of networking" (Hopkins et al. 2011, p. 18). The eight Regional Networks led by RNLs, were seen to be a crucial vehicle in the improvement of NMR schools in creating a climate in which innovation and knowledge transfer were not only facilitated, but fast-tracked.

NMR data showed pleasing improvement trends in literacy and numeracy from 2008-2010. By 2010, literacy and numeracy measures situated NMR schools at or about state means, with a general reduction of students in the lower performance bands and an increase in students in the top performance bands. In the analysis of three pilot school results, achievement growth off a very low base was much greater than for the rest of the state as students entering the schools have literacy and numeracy levels two years behind expected levels. Schools adopted the high expectations of two years growth in one year, and the early evidence at that stage of data collection suggested that schools were achieving this goal with performance at or above the state mean. Across all year levels, NMR schools also showed improved results, year on year over a four-year period, in the measures for morale and distress.

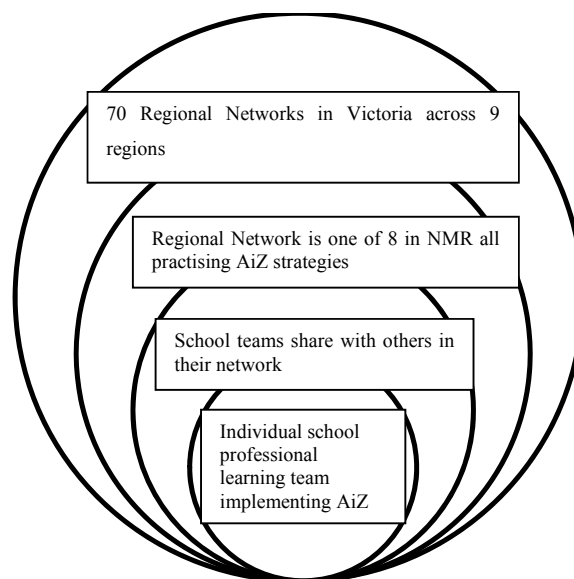


Figure 7. AiZ knowledge-exchange across NMR.

The AiZ strategies looked at improving not only at the achievement outcome strategies, but also student wellbeing by prioritising the importance of safe and

orderly learning environments as essential to effective learning (Zbar, Kimber, & Marshall, 2008).

Summary

The literature review discussed the broad features of organisational networks within the spectrum of Corporate and Inter-organisational Networks, International Networks and Education Networks for the purpose of understanding where Regional Networks fit within that continuum. The features of Regional Networks were identified and compared with other Education Networks of which they are a sub-set. Regional Networks fall short in some areas. Three studies that take into their scope, Regional Networks were identified for the purpose of clarifying ways this structure may have helped or hindered principals in their work. However, none of these studies was phenomenological in design or presented principals' lived experiences.

There is a gap in the existing literature about Regional Networks particularly in relation to the experiences of principals of how this structure helped or hindered them in their work. Therefore this research project provides a valuable addition to the existing body of knowledge surrounding system-wide school improvement through its examination of the experiences of those responsible for delivering the school improvement agenda at the coalface – school principals.

Chapter 3. Methodology and Research Design

Phenomenological research begins with wonder at what gives itself and how something gives itself. (van Manen, 2014, p. 33)

A critical decision for this project was the choice of the most appropriate research methodology. To this end, I explored two different, but not totally disconnected approaches – Phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorn, 1989; van Manen, 1984, 1990, 1997, 2014) and Sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2001, 2009). In broad terms the distinction is made as follows: Phenomenology seeks to be open, interrogating and reflecting upon a phenomenon without any pre-conceived expectation, waiting for the phenomenon to present itself (van Manen, 1984, 1990, 1997, 2014). In contrast, Sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2001, 2009) draws upon sociological theory where the meaning of events, arise from social interaction. Humans act towards things on the basis of meanings that are constructed by them. After careful consideration of both methodologies, in an effort to find the best fit for the research intentions, I choose a phenomenology-based approach. Within this broad field however, a further decision was required of me: Which phenomenological-based approach would I take? I ultimately decided to use a hermeneutic, interpretive approach (van Manen, 1984, 1990, 1997, 2014) rather than a transcendental descriptive approach (Giorgi, 2009, 2012) and explain that decision, moving forward but first I discuss the ontological and epistemological considerations for this project.

The inquiry paradigm of Guba and Lincoln (1994) guided the design of this research proposal. Guba and Lincoln define paradigms as basic belief systems that

are based on three broad levels of questions - ontological, epistemological and methodological. The research approach as an inquiry paradigm is set out in Figure 8.

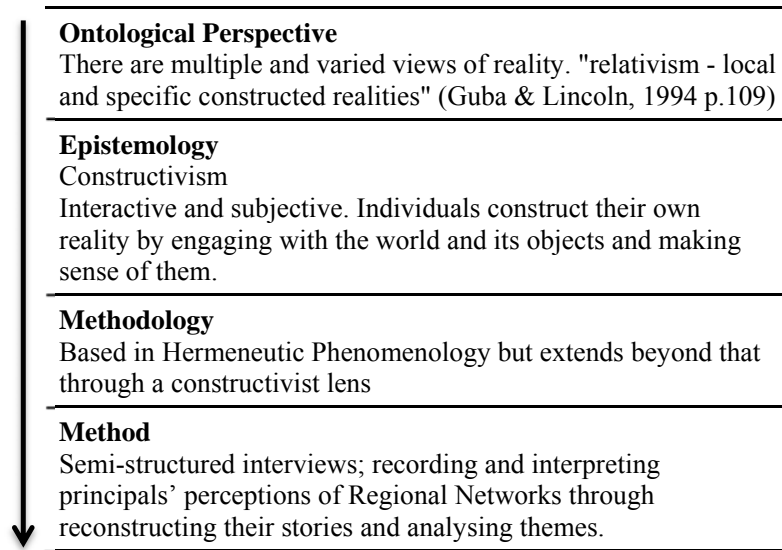


Figure 8. Inquiry paradigm adapted from Guba and Lincoln (1994).

The ontological question asks about the nature of reality and how humans exist in the world. The ontological perspective taken in this project is that reality is seen through many views. Because paradigms are human constructions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) there can be no definitive belief system and all constructed knowledge is open to error. This research design recognises that there are multiple, constructed views of reality and applies a constructivist lens to the research design, acknowledging all points of view are equally valid, and that all truth is relative.

The epistemological question focuses on the relationship between the information seeker and the information being sought. What can be included as knowledge? How are knowledge claims justified in acknowledgement of the varied, constructed realities of research participants? The epistemological underpinnings of this proposal are transactional and subjectivist, therefore through this link between

the researcher and the participants, the findings of the investigation are co-created. For this reason the distinction between ontology and epistemology is merged (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). From an epistemological paradigm, which is also called the worldview (Creswell, 2012), the researcher co-constructs reality with the researched. Guba and Lincoln see these findings as “transactional/ subjectivist; created findings” (1994, p. 109) because the researcher is also shaped by individual experiences; meanings are varied and subjective. The constructivist paradigm warns that the researcher is also a product of their values and experience and cannot be totally independent of them as all humans are influenced by their context. Keeping this point in mind confirms the decision to take a constructivist approach for this project, which seeks to examine the perceptions of principals of a specific phenomenon – that of Regional Networks.

When considering Phenomenology as human science, experiences are considered to be the basic data with which the phenomenologist works (van Manen, 1990, 1997). In framing Phenomenology, van Manen (van Manen, 1990) suggests it is a way of examining how we exist in, and live in, our world. It explores what is distinct in each person's experience and what is common to the experience of groups of people who have shared the same events.

This research design is strongly influenced by hermeneutic phenomenology and inspired by van Manen's (1990, 1997, 2015) style of analysis and interpretation. However it does not follow a strictly phenomenologist methodology because it includes a constructivist lens in the application of the three theoretical frameworks of Systems Thinking (Reference), Professional Capital (Reference) and Governance (Reference) together with the insider perspectives (Reference) to the interpretation coming from the researcher's own experiences within Regional Networks as this was

a key contextual factor in the principals' lived experiences of the network. The attraction to a phenomenological-inspired approach came from the recognition of phenomenology as the study of lived experiences; an individual's perception of a particular phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). However, phenomenology has evolved into varying schools of thought as both a philosophy and a research method and this is where its influence was most significant. A phenomenological approach to research highlights and gains insight into an experience through the perceptions of those directly involved; the researcher can gain insights into an individual's motivations or actions, leading to a generalised understanding of a phenomenon through analysing the collective insights of those directly experiencing them (Moustakas, 1994). I particularly wanted to capture the lived experience of principals of the Regional Network structure to ascertain how this structure supported and hindered them in their work. But I also wanted to have the opportunity to interpret principals' perceptions because of my past experience and involvement in the area of Regional Networks. Therefore, further exploration of my options with regard to a phenomenology-based approach as the preferred methodology for this project, ensued.

Phenomenologist thinkers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, revealed that there are different conceptions of Phenomenology leading to variations in research methods based on their interpretations. Phenomenology studies the structure of experience in all its various forms such as "imagining, perceiving, remembering (van Manen, 1990, p.182). The structure of these forms of experience typically involves what Husserl (1970b) called "intentionality", and that is interpreted by van Manen (1990, p.182) as the directedness of experience. "All human activity is always *oriented* activity, directed by that which orients it."

According to Husserlian Phenomenology, experience is directed toward, represents or “intends” things only *through* particular concepts, thoughts, ideas, images (1931, pp. 243-244). Husserl (1970b, p. 558) gives the example of the idea of the God Jupiter, which exists in one’s mind, but not in the “real make-up of experience”. According to Husserl, Phenomenology has become a study of the intentional content of experience that is the analysis of the directedness of experience.

To understand Phenomenology as a research method, one needs to be familiar with the term Husserl expressed as *lifeworld* (Husserl, 1970a, pp. 103-186). The *lifeworld* (*Lebenswelt*) is the idea of the world as a series of lived experiences. Husserl described the lifeworld as the world “already there”, in his posthumously published text, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Husserl, 1970a, pp. 103-186). This is the world of experience, the world of meanings that appear in life before any philosophising. In colloquial terms this could be likened to our intuitive feelings. Husserl claims that the lifeworld is primary and that the world of science is a derivative of it.

van Manen (1984, p. 184) explains the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) as the world of lived experience outlined by Husserl as “the world as already there”, the “world of immediate experience.” Husserl (1970a, pp. 48-49) discusses the forgotten meaning of natural science, criticises scientists and mathematicians in failing to recognise “the surreptitious substitution of the mathematically substructured world of idealities for the only real world, the one that is actually given through perception, that is ever experienced and experienceable - our everyday lifeworld.”

Understanding the term *essence* is another term crucial to understanding the concept of Phenomenology. Essence, which is derived from Greek *ousia*, means the

inner essential nature of something (van Manen, 1990). By essence, what is meant is coming to the ultimate core of meaning. I have used a variation of this idea as a guide to approaching and understanding of what the experiences of principals within the Regional Network structure was like. A description that captures the essence of something reveals to the reader an understanding of an experience previously not understood. However, through constructing a description of a phenomenon from exactly what has been told to the researcher who has reconstructed it linguistically, a new knowledge of the described experience is revealed. In this way one can now see the significance of the experience in a way that has not previously been seen. Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 8) writes, "Everything that I know about the world, I know from a perspective that is my own." In this quote, Merleau-Ponty makes clear that one's perspective of an experience is the only reality for an individual. Therefore, reiterating Husserl's example of fear being a directed experience, even though what is feared may never eventuate, that fear is the real experience of that individual.

Phenomenology is a systematic attempt to discover the internal meanings of a lived experience, to strip things back to their essential nature. By describing the experience in all its detail and layers, we can explicate meanings. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 7) described Phenomenology as "the study of essences". This means that we can construe meaning from what is revealed to us as some ultimate crystallization of the meaning of that experience.

A phenomenology-influenced methodology as an approach to research particularly made sense to me. I was naturally drawn to its openness, while acknowledging its structure and rigor. The use of first-hand accounts was most relevant to my research questions as I wanted to know about the personal experience of each of the principals I interviewed in relation to their experience of the Regional

Network. I wanted principals' personal stories to reveal themselves through the interview process. However, by looking for recurrent themes and ideas that emerged across the multiple narratives that I examined, I also hoped to find some new and essential understandings emerging about such things as leadership, knowledge-sharing, collegiality and system thinking, within the Regional Network. Constantly aware of my previous role as a Regional Network leader and a former principal, the requirement to set aside my previous experiences, which I believed could enrich my research, challenged me and eventually guided the choice of a hermeneutic-type of approach in this research design.

van Manen (1990 p.150) explains how the narrative that is the recorded experience of the participant in a research study, is their lived experience, as a text. The text and its characteristics, set alongside others' narratives, allows for the analysis that the researcher must engage in.

Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of Phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence - in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her lived experience". (van Manen, 1990, p. 36)

A phenomenology-influenced approach explores the way in which meaning is connected to experience. For the researcher it is essential to interrogate a subject's lived experience through examination of the subject's own descriptive account of a particular experience. The researcher tries to identify a shared experience of a phenomenon across other participants' descriptions of how that experience manifested itself. The more accounts of the same experience that the researcher

explores, the better the researcher's attempt to draw out the universal nature of the experience with the goal of understanding the phenomenon with more clarity. In my study of the experiences of members of Regional Networks, in analysing the individual stories collected, I knew that I would be looking for emergent themes across all the transcripts and I hoped that these themes may relate to a range of experiences about the role of principals and how they interact in a collaborative group.

Phenomenologists, leaning towards hermeneutics (interpretation), stress the importance of being open to what is presented. This was also essential to my approach to the analysis as the goal was to gather the lived experiences of the participants. Traditional hermeneutics, which had its origins in biblical interpretation and in developing a set of rules to guide interpretation no matter what the subject matter, led to ideas about interpretation being integral to phenomenological analysis. Hermeneutic Phenomenology, as opposed to Transcendental Phenomenology, interprets the experience as opposed to just describing it. Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, (Heidegger, 2010, p. 63) outlined his version of Phenomenology which acknowledged the influence of interpretation on beings "in the world". For this reason Heidegger is seen to be the father of Hermeneutic Phenomenology. Later his approach was enriched by the scholars like Han-George Gadamer (1975), Paul Ricoeur (1980) and van Manen (1990, 2014). For Heidegger, we and our activities are always "in the world", our being is "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 61). Therefore for Heidegger and those who followed his ideas, bracketing one's experiences of the world was not advocated, because activities and the meaning derived from experiences have a contextual relationship to things in the world. This is an important distinction between Transcendental and Hermeneutic

Phenomenology. Therefore, according to Heidegger, one needs to distinguish “beings” from their “being”, examining one’s own existence in the activity of “Dasein”, “of one’s being-in” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 161).

Furthermore Heidegger (2010) believed that there was no valid distinction between consciousness and the world; that consciousness could not be separated from the world in which humans exist, arguing that humans necessarily interpret everything in terms of language and experience. The first experience is of being there in the world, this being there, he called Dasein. Therefore, Heidegger rejected the Cartesian tradition of separating the physical and mental. Dasein and the world are a united phenomenon. Heidegger looked through the root meanings of “logos” and “phenomena”, so that Phenomenology is defined as the art or practice of “letting things show themselves” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 161). Heidegger rejected the idea of suspending personal opinions and instead turns to the interpretive narration of the description. Hermeneutic Phenomenology is focused on the subjective experience of individuals and groups through an interpretation of their stories and proposes the use of the hermeneutic cycle of reading, reflective writing and interpretation.

I was strongly influenced by the fact that hermeneutic phenomenology is the practice of textual analysis; the analysis and interpretation of the narrative or text. van Manen (1990, pp.151-152) identifies the main aspects that will guide the researcher in drawing out the interpretation. These aspects are: orientation; strength; richness; and depth. Although there is no prescriptive approach to the process of hermeneutic phenomenological research, van Manen’s guidelines (1990, p.151) form the important principles that have fashioned my analysis. “Orientation”, (van Manen, 1990, p.151) relates to the engagement of the researcher in the world of the participants and their stories. “Strength”, (van Manen, 1990, p.151) refers to the

authenticity of the text in portraying an understanding of the underlying meanings expressed by participants through their stories. “Richness”, (van Manen, 1990, p.152) is about the aesthetic quality of the text. “Depth”, (van Manen, 1990, p.152) demonstrates the ability of the text to dig deeply and express the true intentions of the participants. In his later work, van Manen (2014, p. 224) discusses the method of hermeneutic reduction as consisting of the “bracketing of all interpretation and explicating reflectively whatever assumptions seem to need attention in writing the research text”. van Manen sees the hermeneutic reduction as a search for “openness” where one must overcome “one’s subjective feelings, preferences or inclinations that may seduce or tempt one to come to premature, wishful or one-sided understandings of an experience” (van Manen, 2014, p. 224). These were all strong influences on me as a researcher.

Phenomenology as a philosophy, for me, can be likened to a secluded country road, which over time has been developed into a multi-lane highway. This analogy captures the development of a myriad of approaches to Phenomenology as a research method, all with subtle or pronounced differences. The road that has evolved is complex and difficult to traverse for the novice researcher but it is one which must be travelled if one is to understand the most appropriate choice of research method for one’s own project. Just as Phenomenology the philosophy has its roots in previous philosophical thought and has developed into its own schools of thought, so too research methods under the banner of various types of phenomenological analysis, have been used and documented by those working in the fields of psychology and social sciences. von Eckartsberg (2010) explains the development and evolution of phenomenological thought very aptly when he likens it to a renovated building.

The house of Phenomenology has undergone many renovations and additions, appropriating both deepening and widening contexts of understanding from depth-psychology, from hermeneutics, from the critical social sciences, and from the various forms of post-modern thinking. (von Eckartsberg, 2010, p. 146)

Phenomenologists, leaning towards hermeneutics, stress the importance of being open to what is presented. "The essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open" Gadamer (1975, p. 310). In Heidegger's early work hermeneutics is seen as that by which the basic structures of factual existence can be understood. In his 1920s lectures on the hermeneutics of facticity, Heidegger (1988/1999) outlined a theory of the structure of understanding. The Hermeneutic Circle that had been at the heart of the idea of previous hermeneutics, looked at the interpretative relationship between the parts and the whole. The Hermeneutic Circle referred to one's understanding of the text as a whole, but relies on an understanding of the individual parts in reference to the whole. The movement back and forth in seeking that interpretation is circular in nature.

Gadamer (1975), as a student of Heidegger, built on his ideas and re-conceptualised the Hermeneutic Circle to a series of backward and forward iterations. He rejected any method or set of rules that would be prescriptive for hermeneutic analysis.

We started by saying that a hermeneutic situation is determined by the prejudices that we bring with us. They constitute, then, the horizon of a particular present, for they represent that beyond which it is impossible to see. But now it is important to avoid the error of thinking that the horizon of the present consists of a fixed set of opinions and valuations, and that

otherness of the past can be foregrounded from it as from a fixed ground. In fact the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices (Gadamer, 1975, p. 317).

Gadamer's positive view of prejudice opens us up to the issue in such a way that our prejudgments are always capable of being revised. This is his contribution to the version of the Hermeneutic Circle, which seeded subsequent hermeneutic approaches to phenomenological research methods. For Gadamer all understanding is interpretative because it involves the exchange between the familiar and the alien.

Finlay (2014) is reassuring in the idea that there is not one definitive way to do Phenomenology; as a methodology it has a flexibility that can be adapted to suit a researcher's style. She suggests tips for novice researchers in being clear about what version of phenomenological analysis one is engaging in. This is sound advice because the complexity and breadth of phenomenological thinking can be daunting for the fledgling researcher. One must be clear on one's approach to ensure it is consistent and methodological.

In the sense that phenomenologists such as Finlay (2014), van Manen (2015), Eckarstberg (2010) and Gadamer (1975) demonstrate the various approaches to phenomenology that have evolved, in the choice of methodology that best suits this research, I have drawn heavily on the principles of phenomenology while combining it with other lenses that allow for a different analysis of the complexities of the Regional Network experience that may add additional perspectives and subtleties to the presentation and discussion of experiences. Figuratively speaking, I have been on a journey around the world and back again in my efforts to understand Phenomenology and its complexities as a research method. I started with the

historical perspective of Phenomenology as a philosophy and attempted to trace its evolution into a human science research methodology. I tried to do this while still continuing to grapple with the intricacies and shades of interpretation that has its seeds in a long chain of philosophical origins. I started on one path only to find many forks in that path that have all required a sojourn; consideration of each fork, illuminating and ultimately guiding me to the strong influence of a hermeneutic phenomenology- based hybrid methodology.

The Research Design

The following questions have guided this study.

1. How did principals perceive their experience of Regional Networks?
2. In what ways did membership of Regional Networks help or hinder principals in their work?

Data Collection and Recruitment of Participants.

Having decided on the research method and established the most suitable methodology for this research project, the practicalities of the research design were then firmed up. In taking a phenomenological-influenced stance which depended on individuals' lived experience, the qualitative analysis of data did not dictate large numbers of participants, as I would be analysing each experience in its own right. After extensive, individual consideration, a hermeneutic-type approach to the analysis was chosen as it would allow for interpretation of emergent themes together with the reconstruction of individual stories. Therefore, data collection was proposed through the semi-structured interviews of 10 principals who were members of a Regional Network, with the goal of gaining their experiences as a member of a Regional Network. The number was decided upon because 10 participants would

allow for the inclusion of the range of principals and schools that would typify membership of a Regional Network, leading me to interview principals from primary, secondary and special settings. Covering a range of Regional Networks was also a consideration. As I was not conducting a case study I did not restrict the selection of participants to one network. I was seeking a range of views from principals across the Southern Metropolitan Region (SMR) of Victoria and, ultimately, participants were sourced from five of the nine Regional Networks that had existed in Southern Metropolitan Region at that time. These five networks were within a 40-kilometre area and were geographically accessible within a reasonable travel time.

Recruitment of participants eventuated, initially through contact with Network Chairs of the current arrangement of networks. I outlined the intentions of my research and was subsequently invited to speak to network principals at their network meetings to explain my project and outline the ways that participants could be involved. The letters outlining the research proposal and consent forms were emailed to principals by the network chairs and those interested in being involved could then contact me directly and return consent forms if they wished to proceed.

Semi-structured, recorded interviews, of around 60 minutes in length, were proposed and approved by the Ethics Committee. This timeframe was considered as a suitable length of time to capture perceptions of a phenomenon. While there needed to be some formality to the interview structure, this semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility and the building of rapport. The intention was for each participant to feel at ease about telling their story, in response to the initial question: Can you speak about your experience as a member of a Regional Network? As this is a phenomenological study, the first question posed invited an open-ended response.

The experiences of each participant must be carefully drawn out in order capture their unique experience of the Regional Network. From this initial response the interviewer could prompt the participant to speak about particular aspects of their network experience that had not initially been revealed. To assist with this process an interview guide (see Appendix) listing prompting questions and topics that needed to be covered during the conversation was developed. This was an important addition because participants were only interviewed once. Bernard (1988) suggests that semi-structured interviewing is a good technique when there is only one chance to interview the participant, as it allows for them to express their own views without being directed through a set of definitive questions.

A list of Regional Network artefacts was also included during the interview session. The purpose of these artefacts was to prompt comment on how key documents circulated or generated by the system at the time, were used by individual principals. The provision of artefacts, it is acknowledged, is not acceptable in a strictly phenomenological methodology. Phenomenologists describe phenomena as they appear without “being obstructed by pre-conceptions and theoretical notions” (van Manen, 1990, p.184). For the purposes of this research however, it was important to use artefacts of the system to determine their level of influence. The researcher did not ask questions on the artefacts specifically other than inviting a comment. The list of artefacts that were presented is:

- Allocated principal readings: “*Leadership on the Line: Staying alive through the dangers of leadership*” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) and “*Disrupting Class: How disruptive innovation will change the way the world learns.*” (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008).
- *School Improvement: A Theory of Action* (DE&T, 2007).

- *E5 instructional model* (DEECD, 2009a).
- *The Developmental Framework for School Leaders* (DEECD, 2007b).

Data Analysis

Although there is no set way of embarking on the methodological process of doing a hermeneutic phenomenological research, van Manen's guidelines (1990, 2014) were an excellent measure and were used as the model of analysis for this project. Within this approach three steps were taken: the reconstruction of stories, extended extract analysis and thematic analysis.

Reconstruction of experiences through telling the story. First, a reconstruction of the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon, was developed by rewriting the transcript and transforming it into a story. These reconstructed stories are included in Chapter 5, and were created through the researcher's intense engagement and interpretation of the text. By reducing each participant's experience to a reconstructed interpretation of it, the researcher attempts to gain an essential understanding of that experience. The reconstructed stories were then sent to participants for member checking, who all accepted the stories as an accurate representation of their experiences. It was at this stage that the researcher also added her reconstructed story of the Regional Network experience to set alongside the participants' stories. This served the purpose of offering an additional perspective. Writing the reconstructed story also addressed the researcher's experiences by putting them on the record and thereby giving due consideration to insider status (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). The presentation of the researcher's story serves an additional purpose, however. That purpose is to add to the search for openness according to van Manen's "hermeneutic epoche-

reduction” (van Manen, 2014, p. 224) which includes the practice of “critical self-awareness” in relation to “vested interests” or “pre-understandings”. The researcher identified the nature of her insider status in Chapter 1 and her reconstructed story of the Regional Network experience in that chapter but the decision of where to place the story was given great consideration. It was moved around several times in the course of putting together the final document. Initially it was thought to be appropriately set alongside the participants’ stories, serving the purpose of offering an additional perspective. Because writing the reconstructed story also addressed the researcher’s experiences by putting them on the record and thereby giving due consideration to insider status (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), it was also considered to place the story within this chapter as part of the research design because the presentation of the researcher’s story adds to the search for openness, according to van Manen’s “hermeneutic epoche-reduction” (van Manen, 2014, p. 224), which includes the practice of “critical self-awareness” in relation to “vested interests” or “pre-understandings”. It was eventually decided to place the researcher’s story after outlining the context for Regional Networks within Chapter 1. By placing it there it gives an insider perspective into the RNL role while separating it from the principals’ experiences of the RNL structure. Because the researcher’s voice changes from insider to researcher at different times it was important to set up that idea of dual voices early in Chapter 1.

Extended extract analysis. As a bridge between the reconstructed stories and the thematic analysis, an analysis of three extended extracts was embarked upon as it became clear on examining the transcripts that there was a range of emotions, both positive and negative, that could be experienced by principals who were members of Regional Networks. While the principals, whose extended extracts are

discussed, embraced some aspects of the structure, they struggled with others. These three extracts are used as examples that highlight the mixed feelings that emerged from the Regional Network experience and pave the way for the thematic analysis that is drawn from a close examination of all 10 transcripts.

Thematic analysis. The next stage in the process was a thematic analysis of the text. The researcher looked for the experiential structures that comprise the experience and reveal the meaning. To assist in the textual interpretation influenced by van Manen (1990) the aspects of orientation, strength, richness and depth, were used as guides. These terms have been previously explained within this chapter. Prior to casting van Manen's lens on the transcripts, an initial analysis of themes was carried out by color-coding the text and listing the emergent themes. Themes were then classified under the broad headings of *Regional Network Operations*, *Relationships*, *Learning* and *The system*. Further classification led to categories of what helped or hindered principals in their work. Analysis of themes was then interpreted using the three frameworks identified in the literature review. The first framework is that of Senge's (2006) Systems Thinking and learning organisations. Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) is the second of these and further identifies the elements of social capital, human capital and decisional capital. The third framework is an adaptation of Moore and Khagram's (2004) governance triangle depicting an authorising environment created through the elements of public value, legitimacy and support, and operational capability. These concepts have already been explored in within the literature review and will be referred to again, in detail, when discussing the data analysis discussion and findings.

Legitimation of data. According to Guba's guidelines (1981), the data was verified during the analysis phase of the project when the data analysis was scrutinised for trustworthiness, authenticity, fairness and reflexivity.

Trustworthiness included criteria of credibility, transferability and confirmability. *Credibility* related to the internal validity of the research and involved the techniques employed to ensure that findings and interpretation are trustworthy. Ensuring that a relationship of trust had existed between the researcher and participants was important in confirming that participants felt comfortable to speak freely about their experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stressed the importance of building trust with participants and as the researcher was a former Regional Network Leader who was familiar with the context, this helped facilitate a trustful relationship.

Other techniques that were employed to ensure credibility included: prolonged engagement with the phenomenon; vigilant observation that ensured in-depth study of salient features; triangulation of sources through cross-checking sources and methods; peer debriefing; negative case analysis which involved active searching for negative examples; and, member checks in which respondents received a transcript of their interview for verification. Participants responded to the reconstructed stories and their individual thematic analysis table that were sent to them for member checking, positively. The stories and themes were accepted as reflecting participants' experiences in all cases. Negative examples were reflected in the range of perceptions of the Regional Network experience that were identified, particularly in relation to school type and the relevance of the core business of the Regional Network to school settings that are not mainstream. To ensure *transferability* of the research findings, which could inform other studies, rich

descriptive data gave a detailed context for this research, and allows for judgments about the suitability of applications of this study to other settings. For dependability and *confirmability* the establishment of an audit trail ensures all details of the research design were documented and available for reference and cross checking. At each stage of the analysis participants were included in member-checking the researcher's interpretation of their perceptions.

Because participants in research bring with them their diverse and varied values and are confronted by the researcher, whose inquiry is also influenced by their values, recognising and managing these value systems and constructions presents challenges of fairness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The question of how a researcher conducts research in a balanced and even-handed way, was raised by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Fairness was defined as the balanced view that presents all constructions and the values underpinning them; this definition of fairness underpinned the research design in this project. The researcher took care to faithfully transcribe all interviews from the recordings. As has been stated, all participants were involved in the member-checking process. Participants were regarded as co-researchers in the research design. As the researcher previously worked as a Regional Network Leader, care was taken to avoid contact with any principals who were members of the researcher's previous Regional Network. This ensured that previous connections within the Regional Network structure did not influence participants' responses.

In this research project, *the practice of reflexivity* was enhanced by the use of a reflexive journal in which comments were kept to record the changes, developments and thoughts of the researcher, on the research journey. The researcher, in reconstructing her personal story of the experience of being a Regional

Network Leader, practised reflexive thinking as part of that process. The researcher's story is included in Chapter 1 and can be considered as a counterpoint to the participants' stories in Chapter 4. Through this exercise, and the other strategies outlined above, the researcher has fulfilled a conscious obligation to be reflexive, balanced and professional in working through the task of analysis and interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

As has already been mentioned, to avoid any potential conflict of interest the researcher, a former Regional Network Leader, did not interview principals from the researcher's former network. Data collection did not commence without ethics approval, from both the Australian Catholic University and the Department of Education in Victoria. Confidentiality was assured by the allocation of an identifying code and pseudonym to participants. Transcripts have been stored separately from the coding system to protect privacy and interview notes are stored in a locked file. Soft copies of interviews and analysis have been stored within the ACU password-protected system and will be stored and deleted five years after the research is completed.

The issue of insider research. As a former principal and Regional Network Leader, I have considered the issue of insider research and how that may impact on the process of this research. Importantly I have declared up front my insider status and have practised a reflexive process to set aside bias and maintain objectivity (van Manen, 2014). I have also consulted literature on the issue of Insider/Outsider research, to ensure that my approach is both rigorous and open (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle 2009; Kanuha, 2000; Asselin, 2003; Unluer, 2012). The fact that interviews were recorded and carefully transcribed and member-checked, ensures that the

researcher has been faithful to the transcripts. A sample transcript has been included in the Appendix of this thesis.

It has been advantageous in speaking with participants to understand the culture and historical perspectives of reforms within the state system. As Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (p. 58) point out, sharing language, identity and experiences with the participants can allow for greater acceptance of the researcher, leading to a greater depth of data gathered because of the feelings of connection. The richness of language and honesty of views expressed in the transcripts suggests that the insider connection has helped to build trust and connection in this project. Unluer (2012) has provided valuable guidance in ensuring that the researcher's insider status has not compromised the integrity of the study. After consideration of the advantages, such as having a greater understanding of the culture, Unluer (2012) warns about making wrong assumptions based on prior knowledge as well as the issue of duality when one is researching an area that one is still working in. Although this is not the case in this situation as the researcher has not been involved in working with Regional Networks since 2012, Unluer's insights (2012) provided a good checklist for managing the issue of insider research to ensure appropriate thought is given to possibilities of bias.

The transcripts showed that participants were very comfortable to reveal their feelings and were honest about the range of feelings they experienced as being part of a Regional Network. Debriefing with supervisors was an additional, invaluable strategy, in addition to those strategies that have already been mentioned.

Delimitations of the study. My interest in this study began from my own work as a Regional Network Leader and the issue of insider research has been discussed in the previous section. Taking into account the risks associated with an

insider research approach, it is believed that due consideration has been given to the risk of bias and that strategies to mitigate this risk were introduced and have been previously discussed. The honesty of the responses from participants suggests that participants felt comfortable working with a researcher who immediately understood the context. Insider status allowed the interviewees to express their views in an uninhibited manner, as there was no need to explain the structure or the context for events that occurred during that period.

The Regional Network structure was short-lived and did not realise its goals because of its reduced timeframe due to changes in government policy. There was no opportunity to evaluate what was achieved based on data that was collected at the time because the structure was in place for three years, instead of the envisaged five-year period. I have, therefore, been curious about the way in which principals perceived this experience given the fact that although Regional Networks officially ceased after three years, networks started to languish after two years as the changed policy directions filtered through. This study does not go beyond principals' experiences of the Regional Network structure. It does not extend to the perceptions of teachers and other staff in schools.

The goals of this study were:

- to research the phenomenon of Regional Networks as a system-wide school improvement strategy;
- to collect and analyse the experiences of members of regional networks;
- to gain insights into ways in which this structure helped or hindered principals in their work;

As outlined previously in this chapter, this study has a strong phenomenological influence although it does not strictly follow a hermeneutic

phenomenology methodology but builds on those principles and introduces additional the theoretical lenses of Systems Thinking (Senge, 2006) , Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) and Governance (Moore & Khagram, 2004) to examine principals' experiences of Regional Networks. This study analysed the experiences of 10 principals who were members of Regional Networks between October 2008 and June 30th 2012. The principals who participated in the study were drawn from five of the nine Regional Networks that existed in the Southern Metropolitan Region, which formed part of the Victorian government state system at that time. In the lifespan of the structure there were 70 Regional Networks constituted across the state of Victoria, therefore, this needs to be kept in mind when reading the principals' experiences that are documented in this study.

When consideration was given to data collection the researcher chose to approach networks within the area that was the Southern Metropolitan Region of Victoria, because this area was geographically accessible. It is possible that had the researcher approached principals in another regional area experiences may have been different. However, the phenomenological-type nature of the research meant that it was able to address the researcher's intention of examining lived experiences. Each experience was reconstructed from the participants' perceptions and is unique. While the themes that have been drawn out of the lived experiences of the 10 principals interviewed for this study are insightful and have led to some important observations about system-organised school groupings, this study cannot purport to do more than present the observations gleaned from those who have participated in this study and make some recommendations that may assist leaders of other educational jurisdictions when designing structures for system wide improvement.

The role of memory. The role played by memory was also considered in analysing the data. In asking participants to recall events going back to 2008 consideration needed to be given to accuracy of recall. Literature on adult memory has shown that when adults reconstruct events even in their recent past, there are issues with reliability and accuracy (Ross & Conway, 1986; Yarrow, Campbell, & Burton, 1970). While these findings are acknowledged, they are not considered to be a defining factor for this project because of the nature of this research method. As a phenomenological study this project seeks to understand the lived experiences of 10 principals' perceptions of Regional Networks. It is understood and accepted that each experience is unique and of each participant's own construction. Therefore the perception and recall of that experience is accepted as reality, because it is that person's lived experience.

The preceding account of the methodology, research design and methods shows that full consideration has been given to all aspects of the process to ensure the integrity of the project from consideration of my role as the researcher to determining the methodology and all issues related to ethics, collection and analysis of data, and reporting of the data. The analysis and reporting of data follows in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4. The Stories

When we read we enter it; we begin to care through reading. (van Manen, 1990, p. 91)

Introduction

This chapter presents the stories of the principals interviewed for this study as interpreted and reconstructed by the researcher. The reconstruction of stories is guided by van Manen's approach (van Manen, 1990, 2014) in an attempt to capture what the essential experience of being a member of a Regional Network was like for participant principals. By describing the experience existentially, according to van Manen (1990, p.101), the researcher situates the lived experience in four spaces: lived time "temporality"; lived space "spatiality"; lived body "corporeality"; and lived relation to others "relationality". In his later work van Manen (2014) adjusts these four spaces to five. These are then categorised as: "Relationality-Lived Self-Other" (van Manen, 2014, p. 303). "How is the self experienced in relation" to the phenomenon being studied? "Corporeality-Lived Body" (2014, p. 304) asks How is the phenomenon perceived by the body? How is the body engaged in the world? "Spatiality-Lived Space" (2014, p. 305) refers to the way that space is experienced with regard to this phenomenon? "Temporality-Lived Time" asks how "time is experienced" according to the phenomenon (2014, p. 305); and "Materiality-Lived Things" (2014, p. 306) refers to the significance of "things in our lives".

Using the four spaces initially introduced by van Manen (1990, p.101), the lived time in this case is the period of Victorian state government educational reform that is characterised by the *Blueprint* (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007a) policies "temporality"; the lived space refers to the Regional Networks and their structure

“spatiality”; the lived body relates to individual feelings and reactions “corporeality”; and the lived relation to others, correlates with expressions of collegiality and relationships “relationality”. The researcher’s insider perspective is helpful here in deciphering the system’s common language and placing comments made by principals within the policy context. This existential exploration depicted in the reconstructed stories, prepares the reader for the thematic analysis which follows in Chapter 6 in themes categorised as *What helped principals* and in Chapter 7, as themes categorised as *What hindered principals?* A bridge to the thematic analysis, is provided by Chapter 5. In this chapter, three extended extracts of participants’ contradictory emotions about their experiences, are discussed.

As has been discussed in Chapter 3, which outlines the methodology and research design, a phenomenological study seeks understanding of the inherent depth of an experience, the lived experience, from the perspective of the individual. The researcher seeks to gain an inside view of that experience, (van Manen,1990) not factual recall, but rather what that experience felt like for the individual. As the researcher asks the same question of each participant in the study, it is incumbent upon the researcher to remain open and receptive to those recollections.

van Manen makes the distinction between “comprehending the project of Phenomenology intellectually and understanding it from the inside as it were” (1984, p. 2). By describing the experience in language, the researcher recreates the lived experience and its essential nature. While each lived experience that is reconstructed through the researcher’s crafting is unique, it is possible for the researcher to reflect on the essential themes that cascade from the individual’s recollection of the phenomenon. After the researcher has scrutinised and reflected on the textual accounts of the experience, emergent themes can be compared across all

participants' accounts. van Manen (1984, p. 8) urges that "the researcher needs to 'pull' his (sic) reader into the question such that the reader shares the sense of wonder about the nature of the phenomenon with the researcher." Reflecting on the essential themes that characterise the experience is a necessary step in the analytical process as the researcher describes the phenomenon through writing and rewriting.

Ten principals were interviewed for this project. The participants represented secondary, primary and special school settings and were drawn from five Regional Networks in the Southern Metropolitan Region, as they existed in 2008. Each principal's story is reconstructed in this chapter in an attempt to reveal its essence. All the stories have been verified by the participants to ensure trustworthiness of the data.

Prior to the presentation of the stories, the researcher used her insider voice to provide an explanation of references made to specific programs or events that may not be familiar to those who are outside the Victorian government education system. This is important because it adds to the reader's understanding of the work of Regional Networks and the policy directions advanced by the system as priorities. These explanations come directly from the researcher's own knowledge and experience of that era in her role as both a former Regional Network Leader and principal.

An Explanation of Specific Terms Used in the Stories.

Big Days Out. *Big Days Out*, were state wide professional learning seminars for principals. These were held each year at a venue that could house 1200 principals, who came together from all corners of the state. The purpose was to engage all principals in the vision and agenda for school improvement. Usually there

were guest presenters who were eminent academics in their field, contracted to work with the DEECD, around the building of the capacity of principals to be instructional leaders, that is, leaders involved in driving school improvement at the classroom level.

The Ultranet and the Ultranet Bus. The *Ultranet* was an ambitious, software package that was introduced by the centre to link schools and communities to the system. There were several phases to its introduction and all schools were expected to learn about the package and use it. Some schools were involved in a trial program and Regional Networks had an *Ultranet* coach attached to their schools to support the transition. There were many problems associated with the introduction of the *Ultranet*, and some problems related to the inadequate infrastructure in many schools, to run the software package. At the beginning of 2010 there was an official launch of the *Ultranet* on the first day of the school year. All principals were expected to attend a state-wide seminar (one of the *Big Days Out*) at the Melbourne Convention Centre, while teachers remained at school for the launch. It was envisaged that all schools would come on-line at the one time and the launch was to be streamed live to all schools. However, the package failed at the crucial time and the *Ultranet* launch was a non-event.

The thing that angered principals most about the launch, apart from the fact that they thought they should be in their schools with their staff, was the excessive spectacle and fanfare that surrounded it. The launch was preceded by dancing girls in sparkly costumes, followed by a large, polished bus, named the *Ultranet Bus*, which was driven onto the stage of the Melbourne Convention Centre. The Regional Directors and key personnel from the centre descended from the bus carrying placards promoting the *Ultranet*. Many of the regional personnel looked very

embarrassed to be there. The manner in which the *Ultraset* was launched, and its failure to deliver, created a lot of tension in schools.

Independent Broad-Based Anti-Corruption Commission (IBAC). In February 2016, an investigation into the Ultraset and the manner in which contracts were procured became the subject of a state government investigation through the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC). Investigations by IBAC into other aspects of the financial dealings of the DEECD were initiated in April 2015. The participants in this study were already aware, at the time of interview, that an investigation into the *Ultraset* was imminent because the earlier inquiry into aspects of financial management malpractice by members of the system, had been widely reported in the media. Within that earlier inquiry an investigation of the *Ultraset* was flagged.

Summer Institutes at Harvard. As part of the initiative to build capacity across the system, a scholarship program was introduced called the *Development Program for High Performing Principals*. Several principals who were recipients of this scholarship attended Summer Institutes at Harvard University. These were leadership development programs of various kinds.

Instructional Rounds. *Instructional Rounds* was a classroom observation program, adopted by many networks to build the skills of principals and involve them more in understanding best practice in teaching and learning. The program involved small teams of principals visiting classrooms in a neighbouring school and observing a problem of practice. This was one of the programs introduced by Richard Elmore (Elmore, City, Fiarman & Teitel, 2009) to Victorian government principals.

Writing conventions for the reconstructed stories. All the reconstructed stories faithfully follow the full transcripts of interviews, which are included in the Appendix and are based on the researcher's interpretation of those transcripts. When reconstructing the stories the researcher laboured over and absorbed the language and phrases used by participants during the interview process. The reconstructed stories, for the most part, use the researcher's words as an interpretation of the participants' meaning. However, to give each story its distinctive voice, quotes have been included from the transcripts to capture the tone and character of each participant. Where quotes are used these are included in inverted commas and italics to clearly distinguish the change of voice. The quotes are always included in the body of the text and not indented, even though they may exceed, on occasion, 40 words. The purpose for doing this is to ensure the continuity and flow of each story. While the voice of the participant is tightly intertwined with the voice of the researcher's reconstruction of the experience, it is still clearly discernible as an individual voice. For the purpose of illuminating the individuality of each participant's experience each story begins on a separate page.

Belinda's Story

Belinda's background as a secondary teacher eventually led her to become the principal of a Prep to Year 12 (P-12) College. Belinda described herself as a relatively inexperienced principal when the Regional Networks began as she had only been a principal for three years. She was idealistic and looking for direction.

When I interviewed Belinda I immediately thought that her story captured the complexities of the Regional Network experience in identifying the dual impact of both negative and positive effects. For Belinda the positives far outweighed the negatives but she was still able to acknowledge the aspects of the structure that were problematic. From Belinda's point of view these related to unnecessary system-imposed accountabilities and the extravagant promotion of some system initiatives.

When Belinda described the effect of the mandated membership of the new structure resulting from the merger of two former networks, she found it positive because it broke the dominant influence of the former network by its older members. The new structure gave Belinda a voice and connection with the network that she previously did not have. Mandated membership was not seen to be positive by all principals and this will become evident as the various stories unfold, but it worked for Belinda.

From Belinda's perspective the mandated membership of Regional Networks was advantageous in introducing her to new colleagues with different ideas. However Belinda acknowledged that the issue of mandated membership was difficult to manage. The networks that merged to form the new Regional Network were quite different and for some principals this new structure was borne resentfully. *"It was a forced merge and it was accepted begrudgingly."* She attributed this to the fact that, *"there were personalities that lost some of their power base"*. In spite of

some friction in the blending of two cultures that now formed the Regional Network, for Belinda the outcome was an experience that had a big impact on her development as a leader. It gave her the opportunity to not only form new collegiate relationships but also to take on new roles within the new network. Belinda volunteered for the steering committee in the newly formed Regional Network at the suggestion of the newly appointed Regional Network Leader. The Regional Network Leader had noticed Belinda's capabilities and this was the first definitive step in her further development as an educational leader. *"I don't believe I would have felt that I had anything to offer, I didn't have the confidence in that particular circumstance. I was actually approached by the Regional Network Leader at the time."*

Through the relationship with the Regional Network Leader, Belinda realised the many opportunities available to her to extend her knowledge and make a significant contribution to the system. Over the life of the Regional Network she remained in varying leadership roles on the Executive committee. Belinda commented on her growth as a leader over those years and the fact that she could contribute, and valued contributing her skills, to the network more broadly. In particular, Belinda took over the role of Chairperson of the Student Support Services Committee, which managed the welfare needs of students across all the schools in the network through the allocation and management of a range of support staff such as psychologists, social workers and speech pathologists. *"So in terms of my own personal growth being on the Executive and on that steering committee, I have just loved that. I have met new people, learned new things and learned what I've got to offer"*.

Belinda valued the new direction for schools, which emphasised pedagogy rather than administration. *"That time had a huge impact on the direction of*

schools". Each school in the network was part of the district team and the goal was that the team would work together to improve outcomes for all students. This team approach was understood by principals, using the language of the system, as having a collective moral purpose. The vision for school improvement that was presented by central leaders and the timing of the new structure was perfect for Belinda as a relatively new principal who was looking for direction and inspiration. *"I was in my mind, an inexperienced principal. For me, the timing of the new structure was perfect. I loved it. I love that structure and I loved that time."* What Belinda meant by this was that she saw the Regional Networks as heralding a new and exciting era, very different from the focus that had previously existed. That new focus was on instructional leadership which was a term used by the system to describe principals as leaders of teaching and learning who were the drivers of improved student outcomes in their schools. This required an integral knowledge of how students learn and how to measure that learning. As the work of principals previously focused on administration and management, this new direction was, from Belinda's perspective, purposeful and motivating. The previous networks had been dominated by an older group of principals who regarded the main purpose for meeting to be collegiality. In spite of the goal of collegiality that was espoused, Belinda found the group intimidating and they were not receptive to change. Belinda also valued collegiality but she wanted more from a collaborative group. She found the atmosphere very restricting. She recalled that in the previous network structure *"I just sat there and didn't say anything because I was too scared, basically. And so I was very excited at the thought of that being a change. Because I felt that there was something different out there that could happen"*. The new emphasis on teaching and learning energised Belinda, building her capacity as an educational leader by supporting her

professional growth. *“So in terms of my own personal growth, I felt tremendous opportunities to show that I could not only learn but contribute to the system more broadly.”*

The Regional Network structure focused on the improvement of teaching and learning, as its priority. *“We were able to focus very much on teaching and learning and the way the network was organised we had various working groups working on things and you signed up for the working group that was most relevant for you at the time”*. This focus permeated all the network activities such as conferences and meetings and the role of Regional Network Leader facilitated this goal. *“That was the time that schools talked more about teaching and learning and pedagogy and the use of data”*.

In contrast to some more experienced principals Belinda valued the role of the Regional Network Leader and saw the position as a leadership role rather than just a spokesperson for the system. She appreciated the guidance given to the Executive in determining the network's agenda. The RNL, from Belinda's perspective, was knowledgeable, skilled and had the time to spend on the network's priorities because that was his full-time role. *“Some people felt that the Department was driving the agenda through the Regional Network Leader. I personally never felt that. I thought that our executive of the network guided the agenda of our network which had quite specific needs, but the Regional Network Leader certainly guided us, I won't say he didn't”*.

Belinda never felt that the direction from the Regional Network affected her autonomy as a principal. *“I never felt that my autonomy as a principal was in any way compromised because I believed that the direction I wanted for my school was the direction that the government wanted for the system”*. Belinda's desires for her

school were at one with the system's directions. *"They married together just fine"*. She saw the great benefits of the resources and supports that were generated through the Regional Network structure and the system, at the time. *"The help was definitely the resources that the Department put into system change and strong focus on professional growth through the Regional Network Leaders and the documents, the strong agenda of school improvement etc. We knew what we needed to do and what was there to help us"*.

In a practical sense, Belinda recalled how the Regional Network was organised into various working parties and that the principals in the network joined such groups based on their interests. Belinda talked about her membership of the secondary literacy group, which focused on improving literacy teaching in the network secondary schools. Belinda spoke about the advantages to not only her own school but also the other schools in the network, that benefited from the sharing of new knowledge. *"We would never have had that if we didn't have the network structure that was in place"*. She spoke about the DVD on best practice Literacy strategies that had been developed by the teachers as a direct result of principals' involvement in the literacy working party. The DVD, Belinda proudly told me, was nominated for the State Teacher Excellence Awards.

In reflecting on the Regional Network experience Belinda saw it as a time characterised by curriculum innovation and the system's vision to build the capacity of the workforce. Supports were provided to principals through system-generated documents and a plethora of professional learning opportunities. The vision for the system was reinforced through mass principal forums and it was a time of great system-wide change and opportunity. *"So being at the Big Days Out, even though they were sometimes over the top and I know some people chuckled about them, but*

they exposed us to some high level international speakers and I came back inspired from those days". However, Belinda commented that this time was also marred by periods when the system *"lost its way"* with the failure of the *Ultraset*. She felt that the system lost sight of the ground indulging in embarrassing extravagance that made her cringe. *"With the Ultraset stuff though, while I could see the vision behind it, I didn't know a principal that I mixed with, who didn't know that it was going to fail, the whole planned implementation of it and everyone starting on the one day"*.

Belinda, although generally positive about the Regional Network structure and its leadership, felt that some aspects, such as the development of a network strategic plan were unnecessary and time-consuming; an exercise in compliance. This did not help the negative attitudes of those principals who were still resentful of the new, mandated structure. *"Creating the strategic plan was a chore, our Regional Network Leader probably did most of the work and we just endorsed it and said Thanks very much"*. Those principals who were vocally critical of the development of the strategic plan saw it as a way the system could manipulate the agenda to focus on accountability rather than collegiality. *"People felt: What are we doing wasting our time on this?"* It was true that the new structure had been imposed, Belinda acknowledged, but she saw those resentful attitudes as counter-productive to system improvement. *"So, I didn't love it but I tend to, when the Department asks me to do something, I do it. I think they have their reasons but it was probably a waste of time"*. Belinda went on to elaborate. *"To be really honest, it didn't win people over and you only have success in these things if you win people over. If you start to get people cheesed off because they think it's a waste of time, they stop coming to meetings"*.

Although Belinda found the Regional Network a supportive environment, it did not satisfy all her professional needs and she filled the gap with other memberships. *“I have always gone to secondary principals groups apart from the network. I go to VASSP (Victorian Association of Secondary School Principals) conferences and meetings but I feel my connection with primary principals is satisfied through the Regional Network”.*

Above all Belinda was a strong believer in the system and expressed the sense of security she got from belonging to a system. She found the sense of connection very satisfying and supportive of her role. This was a common thread through all the stories and principals found that knowing they were part of a system assisted them to cope with the pressures of their role. When Belinda said, *“It gives me quite a strong sense of security to be part of a system that has direction”*, this was a sentiment shared by all the principals to varying degrees. In summing up her experience of Regional Networks, Belinda said, *“I may be unusual but I did like the structure and I miss it”.*

Eliza's Story

In Eliza's story she highlighted the aspects of the Regional Network experience of most value to her as being the opportunities for professional learning and the resources developed by the system to support that learning. She spoke candidly about the difficult early days of the new structure as two different cultures came together. However, she valued the direction from the centre and saw herself as part of the system and committed to it. In speaking about her relationship with the RNL at the end of her story Eliza says that she considered herself "*fortunate*" to have had a good leader, suggesting that colleagues in other Regional Networks did not necessarily share that experience. Over the unfolding of the stories this point of the variability in the quality of the RNLs certainly impacted on principals' experiences of the structure. However, for Eliza, the experience was a positive one.

Eliza is the principal of an English Language School. English Language Schools provide for the language learning needs of immigrant students across the primary and secondary years. Students have a placement for six months in which there is an intensive focus on learning English. They then transition to local, mainstream schools. Such schools face the unique challenge of frequent new intakes of students every few months, the cycle of intensive English language teaching and the management of the transition to mainstream schools. Eliza had already been a principal for over 13 years when the new structure was introduced in October 2008 so she had seen many versions of network-type groups.

As a very experienced principal Eliza recalled this period as a time of significant system change, in which the focus turned to improved pedagogy and student outcomes, "*changes that were system wide like getting all the principals together and having a look at common things like: What makes good teaching?*"

From her perspective, at the network level, the focus was certainly driven by the Regional Network Leader. *“So my experience was that the Regional Network Leader drove the agenda”*. Principals were expected to look at the bigger picture of educational need in their district, not just within their own school.

Eliza was active in one of the working groups that developed a best practice video on Literacy teaching and, in her eyes, this was *“probably the most exciting time in that there was a whole system approach so that people changed to think about not only what was happening in their school but how can we have a common approach across the system”*. The reforms meant that there were many opportunities for professional growth at the teacher and leadership levels. *“There were opportunities for growth at many different levels”*. For Eliza the professional learning opportunities that were available at that time mark the period as a special time in her career. She had not previously experienced a time like that when there had been so much investment in building the capacity of the workforce through programs, resources and the Regional Networks.

Eliza talked about the many valuable documents and resources that were generated by the system at the time, *“things like the E5”* and the expectation that principals were involved in regular professional reading. She appreciated the quality of the international speakers who were recruited to build system capacity, and considered the Regional Network Leader role to be a supportive one.

The difference in the directions taken by the system during that time, according to Eliza, was that everything became more targeted towards school improvement. *“It was certainly more targeted. The fact that we all got together once a year for the Big Day Out, where we had fantastic speakers from overseas. I think it created a sense of we are all on the same journey, more so than in the past”*.

Eliza had always valued collegiality, and while this remained an important component of the Regional Networks, she realised that collegiality was not the main focus of this structure. The focus was on building capacity and improving schools and there was an expectation that principals attended network meetings. Eliza had always done this anyway, but now the imperative to attend was made clear. There was certainly pressure on principals to attend network meetings and be actively involved. I know from my own insider experience as Regional Network Leader that the directive to be involved in the networks was written into principals' performance plans. However, this did not bother Eliza. She knew that she was part of a system and was supportive of it. She said, *"I am the type of person who has always attended meetings whether there was an expectation or not. Maybe there was a little less collegiality in that we had our working parties and we were working on our values. We had really tight agendas"*.

Eliza spoke about the tensions caused by the merging of the two networks that formed her Regional Network. She spoke about the early days of the new structure Network and its teething problems. Eliza was clear about the fact that not all principals accepted the new structure and that it took time for the new personalities to gel. Eliza thought that the Regional Network Leader was able to provide the important leadership required for this to occur. *"I think it took time, in restructures there is a period of change, so it took time"*.

Eliza was not a member of the Executive of the network at the time, but she explained that there were many other ways to be involved in the network, such as the role she held on the Professional Development committee. *"I was certainly involved. I was on one of the committees, I can't remember the exact title of the group, and it*

was about having a look at things within a school that impacted on student learning”.

Eliza saw the Regional Network Leader's role as setting the pre-conditions for the effective operations of the network, facilitating and leading, working closely with the Executive. *“What's important is the type of leadership provided by the Regional Network Leader. You need someone who is focused, calm, professional and keeps everybody on task”.* While the structure was a top-down model, Eliza was clear that she never felt that her autonomy as a principal was hindered. *“I didn't think my autonomy was affected”.* She emphasised that she saw herself as being part of a system and not an island. *“We are part of a system, we are not little islands by ourselves”.* Eliza understood that the Regional Network Leader was her line manager but she never saw this as a problem and valued the support that she received.

She also believed that, particularly for a new principal, the role of the Regional Network Leader would have been very important. As a principal of many years' experience Eliza was confident in her role but she was concerned that a new principal needed a lot of assistance. As well as offering that kind of personal support, Eliza saw the Regional Network Leader role as important in facilitating the policy directions of the day. *“I think the Regional Network Leader facilitated and led but the Executive was still very active, and it wouldn't have been fair for the Regional Network Leader to have done all that, I think the role of the Regional network leader was to lead and facilitate”.* In discussing the relationship she had with her Regional Network Leader as her line manager, she did not regard this as a conflicted role. *“It was never a concern for me. I never thought about it that way...they are not there in the sense of telling you what to do. They support you and that's how I see it and if*

they give you feedback then you need to think about that feedback, but no, I didn't see it as an issue. I never thought: Oh my God, the person who is leading the network is now doing my review".

When the strategic plan of the network was mentioned Eliza saw no value in this process. A similar view was held by all of the principals interviewed. While Eliza could see the rationale behind it, the time involved in developing the plan was unnecessary and misdirected. In her view a simpler action plan would have been better. *"It would have been better just to have a couple of goals, and this is how we are going to do it"*. So although this aspect of the network was seen to be excessive, Eliza still saw this period of educational reform was very positive in the way it aligned and supported schools with high quality resources and her school benefited, as did all the schools in the network.

Since the Regional Network structure ended, Eliza explained that the principals themselves have been running the network and while she saw that as adding to her workload, she felt an obligation to give back to the system because she is committed to it. She enjoyed being involved in organising speakers and such things. *" So I think you have to give back to the system, so it is more work, but so is any additional role. But I have enjoyed the work and I'm happy to give my time"*.

She lamented that after the Regional Networks were abandoned there had been no direction from the system for some time. *"We've had a couple of years where there has been less direction, or little direction, so people are floating along on past things"*. She has found this very difficult. *"The more support the better, because it is a very isolating thing being a principal"* and she commented that the more support offered from the system, the better. *"I think if someone was a new*

principal, it would be really, really hard". That sense of connection to the system was an important supportive aspect that helped Eliza in her role as principal.

Eliza valued the Regional Network period as a time of "*innovation*", but more so, she appreciated the collegiality that was generated and being part of a team. These things, Eliza pointed out, were always valued by her in whatever structure the system has put forward. "*I've always valued the networks in whatever ways they have been run. I think it's sad if someone chooses not to be in any network and their school would lose out because of that*".

Eliza saw the benefits of collaboration being that all schools win and that the workload is shared. She summed up the period as follows. "*Yes, I think they were exciting times. I think the Regional Network Leader role was very supportive and I've been fortunate in that I had a very good Regional Network Leader*".

Jennie's Story

Jennie's story is distinctive because it captures the feelings of isolation that a principal could experience within the Regional Network structure, particularly if their school was not a mainstream one. Although she had a congenial relationship with her RNL she did not feel that he had a deep understanding of her setting. As well as being a relatively inexperienced principal, Jennie's issues were compounded by the lack of understanding by the system and other principals, of her school's special needs. This impacted on her lack of connection with network projects and initiatives that focused on data that was irrelevant to Jennie's students. Jennie needed to look elsewhere for the real support she needed; this came from her membership of a self-forming Special Schools' network. However, what struck me when I interviewed Jennie was her courageous and tenacious commitment to the idea that her school would be represented as an equal player within the Regional Network structure. She, therefore, took on a role on the Executive committee. Jennie also recognised the excesses of the system at the time and later in her story she spoke about how uncomfortable she felt about that.

At the time I interviewed Jennie she was the principal of a Specialist Development School (SDS), which caters to the needs of students with significant intellectual impairment. When the Regional Networks were introduced in 2008 she had only been a principal for three years. In describing Jennie's feelings about the Regional Network structure, it would be fair to say that Jennie's feelings were mixed.

The positive aspect to the structure, she recalled, was the fact that the Regional Network Leader was supportive and she had a good relationship with him because under the new structure the RNL had more time to be involved with schools

as there were fewer schools in the network. Jennie regarded the Regional Network Leader as her line manager and she found him to be caring and approachable but his knowledge about her school was not deep. *"I saw him as a direct line manager, someone who was responsible for my performance and development, but I also saw him as a very supportive individual who was more contactable and approachable"*.

However Jennie recalled the tensions surrounding the mandated merger of the two networks that combined to form the new Regional Network. These two networks were very different. One had been very *"professional"* and there was a climate of trust, a structure to the meetings and a focus on professional learning. This had been her former network. The other network was more focused on lunch and collegiality. *"The other network that merged with us had principals who had been there for a very long time, a group of very, very strong individuals whose voices were always heard and they didn't feel that they particularly wanted to join our network"*. Members made it clear that they didn't want to merge and their priorities were very different. *"I just don't think they liked the way the structure was. I remember them, not calling us nerds but saying something like, along the lines of, we were doing as we were told"*.

As a member of the Executive at the time, Jennie recounted how she was subjected to passive-aggressive behaviour from the resentful members of that group who had no interest in moving forward. During a network activity that Jennie, as a member of the Executive, was running, *"one of these principals told me, I am not interested in bloody consultation, just tell us what we have to do"*. She talked about how difficult it was to bring the two groups together because of the resistance that was encountered. *"I remember feeling, intimidated - is too strong a word, but there was a lot of resistance, a lot of obvious resistance"*. She talked about a particular

instance at an early network meeting when she was coordinating an activity as part of the Executive. The activity required principals to move to a new table and join the discussion with colleagues they did not already know. The resistant group refused to move and did not willingly engage. In the end Jennie moved her chair and joined the resistant group who reluctantly paid lip service to the activity. It was a very tense situation. *“There was a particular table of the other principals who refused to move and so I got my chair and paper and pencil and sat over with them. I deliberately did it and started to ask questions. They did engage in a conversation but I could feel they were not really happy about it”.*

She had *“mixed feelings, absolutely mixed feelings”* about the policy directions as well. Jennie saw the directive nature of the system's policies of accountability and data use, at times, in conflict with her role as principal of a special-needs school. She said, *“on the one hand we were given scope to run the school, and on the other hand we were told what to do. So, it was a bit of a juxtaposition of having any autonomy and being basically hit over the head with a big stick”.*

Jennie felt that the system had never really catered to the needs of her Specialist Development School; therefore, she was always required to modify things to make them fit her context. *“We have never fitted into the system”.* Accountability measures related to data collection were always an issue, as her school's needs are vastly different from the mainstream. *“A lot of time it was to do with things like NAPLAN”.* With regard to the network's strategic plan, this had no value for Jennie's school. *“It wasn't really relevant to my school”.* From her observations, principals of mainstream schools were also ambivalent about the strategic plan.

“Some people thought it was a lot of busy work, a lot of accountability. I know some people thought it was really good, there were mixed feelings about it”. It was a system compliance exercise driven by the Regional Network Leader.

The constant lack of consideration by the system for the needs of schools like Jennie's led to her seeking out membership of another self-formed network that served her needs more appropriately - the Principals' Association of Special Schools, *“we all have the same issues”*. This network is the one that Jennie considers serves her needs most appropriately. Jennie also found that many of the system documents generated and promoted through the Regional Network were not relevant to her setting but she used what she could, such as the *Developmental Learning Framework for School Leaders*, which was a tool for development of staff. Much of the professional reading was not relevant either. However, Jennie valued the *“collegiality”* that the Regional Network also offered, so she stayed actively involved in spite of the fact that it did not adequately serve her needs. *“I feel very strongly, I don't want to be that principal who is in the SDS, who doesn't want to come to meetings and who disconnects with things”*. She valued the *“professional dialogue and being able to talk to people about how they would do particular things”*.

In spite of feelings of marginalisation, Jennie had always worked within and was committed to the system. She constantly felt at odds with the lack of recognition from the system for special needs schools. *“I saw the system as driving the improvement agenda but I never felt totally part of the system, to be honest. I've always felt like we were the lost cousins, and that hasn't changed”*. She understood that the system was driving a school improvement agenda but that agenda did not really cater to her professional needs, or that of her school. She also expressed the

view that she did not feel valued within the Regional Network because her school was different. She did not feel that other principals understood her work and challenges. *"I didn't feel the work here, in this school as an SDS, was valued in the same way as work in other schools. That sort of mentality"*.

For Jennie the real power of networks came from her special school association. Jennie felt a strong allegiance with her chosen network, the Principals' Association of Special Schools, because all the members shared the same professional challenges for which they sought collaborative solutions. *"The membership grew and grew and now we are a strong body"*. A big issue for principals of special schools was how to best assess student progress. The emphasis, by the Regional Network, on data sets that were not relevant to a special school setting, created divisions for many special school principals who felt that they were not given appropriate consideration by the system.

Jennie was also critical of the excesses of the system at the time, in bringing principals together to the *Big Days Out*. Jennie saw this as *"the biggest waste of money by the Education Department. The purpose was to build collective capacity, to get a commonality of vision, if you like a sense of purpose but I don't think it did that at all"*. She was also very critical of the *Ultraset* launch, which she saw as an embarrassment and a circus because of the ostentatious nature of the promotion. She recalled her involvement in the *Ultraset* trial and its failure. (The reader is reminded of the explanation of the *Big Days Out* and the *Ultraset* and other such terms, which precedes the principals' stories, at the beginning of this chapter). *"So I would go along to the pilot meetings and what have you, I just felt it was way too ambitious. I felt it should have been done differently...Blind Freddie could have seen that it wasn't going to work"*. Jennie also sensed a lack of transparency related to the

Ultranet that she could not put her finger on at the time. *"It seemed to be, not secret business going on, but I always felt that there was something. Not secret business, that's probably the wrong thing to say. I felt that part of it was transparent and part of it wasn't"*.

In focusing on the Regional Network Leader role, however, Jennie felt that its success depended very much on the individual network leader and their personality. She observed that the quality of leadership varied everywhere. While she said that the Regional Network Leader was personable and supportive and that the relationship was positive, she did not feel there was a great deal of understanding for her work and its challenges, particularly in relation to data collection. Therefore, Jennie worked within the structure and took from it what worked for her. *"Some people felt they had great support from their Regional Network Leader because they had a deeper understanding of the work we do, and if you don't have a deep understanding of the work we do, it's a little different."* While Jennie's relationship with the Regional Network Leader was congenial, that *"deep understanding"* of the work of her school was missing. For this reason Jennie believed that the structure prior to the Regional Networks worked better for her because her line manager at the time understood her school's context very well. *"It just worked better for me, I just felt it was better for me. Sorry, I can't explain why"*.

Laura's Story

As Laura spoke about her perceptions of the Regional Networks, it occurred to me that she depicted both the highs and lows of this period most articulately as she captured the complexity in the range of emotions that the era evoked. Even as an extremely experienced principal, she was excited by the educational vision driven by the centre. She was genuinely excited by opportunities for professional learning that were a hallmark of the period but she also recognised that the system was rife with nepotism and favouritism that she believed had locked her out of achieving her full potential. That lack of recognition by the system for her abilities impacted on her participation in the new network structure. She valued and respected her colleagues in the Regional Network but felt that she had been overlooked by system leaders because of her outspoken nature. This curbed the commitment to her involvement in the new structure while she was supportive of it. She didn't agree with the excessive emphasis on accountability that became part of the RNL's agenda and she did not see the role as a leadership one. From her perspective the RNL was a conduit for central policy dissemination.

Laura was the principal of a large primary school and when I interviewed her she told me proudly that she was, *"in my 21st year as a principal"*. During the decade of her leadership in her current school it grew to double its size. When the Regional Network structure was introduced, she recalled that she had already been a principal for over 14 years, having experienced several other versions of networks over her career. Previously Laura was the principal of a considerably smaller primary school. Even after all her years as a principal she remained passionate about state education and committed to the system. Laura always valued belonging to a professional collegial group and had seen many iterations of the network structure

within the state system over her years of principalship. These have varied in size and focus but of the Regional Networks she said, *"I loved it. I wanted to go. I loved the round table discussion which was vibrant, people could talk openly"*. However, what was paramount in any of the collegial groups to which Laura belonged was the building of trustful, respectful relationships with both principals and regional personnel and the professional dialogue that was always a feature of the meetings. Laura recalled *"the journey for me in my early years as a principal, I suppose, was really built around networks in the sense of belonging to a professional collegial group. So that was back in the 90s when I was principal of ----- where the network process was incredibly strong"*.

Laura preferred a time when principals created their own agendas within their networks, as opposed to the directive agenda that accompanied the Regional Network structure, *"it was very much driven by ourselves"*. In that regard she had mixed feelings about the Regional Networks, especially with their strong emphasis on accountability. Laura considered that the accountability expectations over this period were excessive. *"I suppose in terms of that 2008 period, I'm not so sure whether the agenda of pure accountability was necessarily a positive one."* Nevertheless, she could also see the good things that were achieved over that time, such as the strong educational leadership, the growing use of information technology and curriculum development. *"Look, there were good parts of it and I think, ultimately, it came down to the nature of the various principals in the network and their view of what the network should be."* Laura believed that the effectiveness of any network depended on its principals. *"The calibre of the principals in our network was very, very high and people had great respect for each other's schools and what was going on there"*.

In her Regional Network the other principals were just as committed to the system as she was. *“I think they go in seeing we are educators in the state education system; there is a system in place and we are committed to it and want it to be the best it can be”*. Because of this connection with the system, Laura felt that sometimes principals went along with things that they did not really see as having practical value. Here she referred to the development of the network strategic plan, which was regarded as more of a compliance exercise, but it was done with good will because of a respect for the system. *“So in those days, when we were developing strategic plans I think we were doing it **for** the Department, so that they were accountable to those above them.”*

Laura's perception of this period of educational reform was that it was a very exciting time, a time of building the capacity of the system and knowledge creation. There were many opportunities to develop leadership skills. It was a *“charismatic kind of change going on that enveloped us all”* and driven by the Assistant Secretary at the centre. The change in culture was about principals understanding that they needed to be lifelong learners, and develop their own knowledge and skills as well of those of their teachers. The focus was on Instructional Leadership, in that the emphasis was on building principals' pedagogical skills. The government had a clear agenda and the Regional Networks were instrumental in implementing that agenda. *“I think we were all very excited to see there was a Blueprint, there was a clear articulated and documented vision around what education should look like in a school and who the stakeholders should be and how to involve them”*.

Laura saw the Regional Network Leader's role as an important one in being a conduit for the information coming from the centre. She saw the Regional Network Leader as a supportive person, very visible, who helped people connect to each

other; but she did not experience leadership coming from that role. From Laura's perspective, the role was more about facilitation of meetings than leadership. *"I don't think the Regional Network Leaders, the Regional network leaders that I have seen, have played a leadership role and I think there is a great disparity between the role, the clarity around the expectation that principals would have of them being leaders rather than managers"*. Laura believed the leadership came from the central office and the Deputy Secretary, and that the policy directions were enacted through the networks, driven by the Regional Network Leader working in collaboration with the Executive committee. Recalling those times Laura loved the collegiality and the vibrant discussions that occurred. She wanted to go to the meetings because they were high energy and *"generated good educational discourse"*. All the principals wanted the best for their schools but Laura acknowledged that *"principals can get caught up in the day-to-day technical aspects of their leadership and this really helped us all to focus on educational leadership and the core purpose of our role which is around student outcomes and student learning."*

While Laura found collegiality and support in the Regional Network structure, she was not as enthusiastic about some of the network's projects, such as *Instructional Rounds* that had become a special initiative of her network. She saw this as an artificial and presumptuous exercise in which principals visited classrooms in other network schools and observed a problem of practice (see the discussion of Laura's extended extract in Chapter 5). For Laura, there was more meaning in a peer coaching approach. Therefore, while appreciating the work of her principal colleagues and the network leader, the Regional Network on its own did not fulfil Laura's needs or those of her school's directions.

As a result Laura looked outside the Regional Network to an additional collegiate group, that of the International Baccalaureate (IB) network. *"I have the IB network. I do have lots of strong networks and I use them."* The IB group was more closely aligned to the path of her own school as having an international school curriculum and provided her with the appropriate challenge and affirmation for her strengths that was missing from the Regional Network structure. But Laura had high regard for the work of many of her principal colleagues within the Regional Network at the time. There was a strong commitment to ensuring the government's priorities were implemented and the meetings were always well attended. *"I mean now attendance at a network meeting would be around 25%, on a good day, maybe 50%".* The meetings during the Regional Network structure were regarded as learning workshops because they created wider opportunities for discussion. *"It was high energy because the government had a high challenging agenda, that we all wanted our schools to be achieving."*

The Executive committee of the network worked well in managing the resources and keeping the vision for change on track. *"I think the Executive has always been important, It's really important for a small group of people to go away, take on board the views that are expressed at a network meeting and unpack it".* Laura outlined that in a practical sense, the network focused on engagement and retention of students. The agenda was clear and the resources directed by the system into professional learning, made principals feel valued. Laura, at various times, was on the Executive committee of other principal networks but not necessarily at the time of the Regional Network structure. Over the years she had become more cautious about expressing her strong views at meetings where regional personnel were present because she felt that there were repercussions. *"I went off the Executive*

early but also, as you get older, you feel that your views, you don't want to, because I used to speak quite a lot at network meetings, you don't want to be seen as a loud-mouth."

In spite of the excitement and opportunities for professional growth that were offered by the educational landscape at the time, Laura expressed reservations about the way things were handled in the system over that period. She saw nepotism in the way appointments were made, including the appointment of Regional Network leaders. There was a sense of the existence of an exclusive club of favoured people. *"I think there was a systematic sense of boys' network and girls' network where people were chosen to be in the inner circle and they continued to be over decades. So it didn't matter which government was in".* Although Laura recalled this time as a period of great educational vision, it was also a time of favours for the chosen ones. From that perspective Laura felt that she never received the recognition for her skills and experience that she would have expected and deserved. *"As I head towards retirement in the next 12 months I look back and know that I have loved every day but the thing I have regretted most, not regretted but been disappointed in most, was not to be seen as someone worthy to be considered or consulted about anything at a regional level."*

However, Laura remembered the time of Regional Networks fondly, in that there was a sense of support for principals and a clear focus on improving student outcomes. *"There was a clear, consistent common language from government, to region to network, to school".* Laura recalled the support that came in the form of resources for principals and schools that was a feature of the period. *"Fantastic. It was probably, in my time, the best period as a principal because of the educational vision."*

Martin's Story

Martin's experience of the Regional Network structure was somewhat frustrating, as his new network was forcibly re-structured just as things were working really well. It started off on a positive note and, just as things were really working well for Martin and his school, it all fell apart as far as he was concerned, leaving him bitter and disillusioned. For Martin, the region's interference in the unnecessary restructure of this Regional Network after the first year left him disinterested after that point.

Martin was a secondary school principal in the outer growth corridor of the southern metropolitan area and had been a principal for five years when the Regional Networks were introduced. Martin had been very pleased with the level of secondary principal collaboration that had developed in the district through his initial Regional Network. This level of collaboration had not been evident in the district before. *"I can go through some of the fantastic work we were doing"*. Therefore, the requirement to move to another network was particularly frustrating for Martin and his school because he saw the decision as an ill-considered one taken by the regional office without any consultation or negotiation. The rationale given was that the area was a growth corridor and that eventually, based on growth projections, the network would become too large. *"All of a sudden after this network was going well...I felt quite arbitrarily, we were shunted off to another network"*. Martin, to this day, cannot see the evidence or sense behind this decision that impacted so greatly on only a few schools but his was one of them and, for his school, the decision was damaging and negated the *"fantastic"* work that Martin felt had been achieved in the first stages of the Regional Network's existence. Martin told me about the collaboration on curriculum development and enrolment protocols, as an example.

Martin wrote to the Regional Director and put forward a case for his school remaining where they were, in the Regional Network that had gelled so well with the secondary principals in the area, but the decision was not re-considered. Martin found this made no sense as the Regional Network had just got going and had a life of its own. *“And I thought there were so many good reasons for not making the change that were absolutely in line with regional goals and aspirations”*. This point about the frustrations experienced by principals as a result of mandated memberships and restructures of some Regional Networks is expanded upon in the chapters dealing with the thematic analysis of what helped and hindered principals in their work. Martin recalled that this forced move occurred in 2009 when the Regional Network structure had been in place for around a year. It was decided that three networks should be made out of two. Martin felt *“devastated”* by this decision, as the new group he was expected to join did not align with his school community; it just did not make any sense. *“All my community was basically in ----- but we were being put into this other network that didn’t make sense.”* Martin went on to further express his frustration at this decision, which still appeared to anger him several years later. *“I thought, this is why at times principals get their backs up with the previous regime because there was an element of: Mmmm, we’re in charge here and you’ll do things our way; sometimes even when there was not the most perfect reason for it”*.

However, Martin reluctantly ended up joining the new network but *“the level of collaboration was quite different”* from what he had experienced in the previous 12 months. Martin's memories of the first Regional Network were that it was a *“fantastic”* new beginning that was also well resourced. *“The principals gelled together as a group and took advantage of regional initiatives to get together and*

collaborate". There was a high level of collaboration and, as part of that, a special secondary schools network was created as a sub-group of the network.

Over that period there was a lot of sharing ideas and best practice and, for the first time, secondary principals were collaborating about what was best for the students across the district. Martin felt empowered and the schools worked together on enrolment protocols, which had previously been a point of tension. Now there were guidelines that had been developed within a trusting environment and the relationship between colleagues was good. *"Those discussions were really positive and we did come up with an agreed set of guidelines that for a couple of years we really stuck to, and sometimes it was a bit ouchy to stick to them. But it was just worth it because the benefits through the collaboration and trusting relationship far outweighed what you might get by picking up a terrific student from outside your area"*. No one was prepared to break the protocol because it would have soured the relationships between schools. Martin saw that as really positive and the relationship of sharing and collaboration continued to increase. However, when Martin was compelled to change to the new network in 2009 all those relationships seemed to end. *"That was the end of that. They finished, well, they finished for us"*.

Recalling that time when the Regional Network experience was so positive for Martin, he saw the meetings as meaningful. The Regional Network Leader made sure that the meetings took place and that everyone understood the importance of attending and contributing to the network's success. Martin felt that the Executive committee, made up of principals, worked well. However, he was not a member of that group. He recalled that the governance structure meant that there was a rotation of principals on the Executive; people moved on and off allowing others to be involved. Martin mused that he did not see that *"level of movement"* on the

Executive of the new network. Martin found the new network arrangement very unsatisfactory because several of his feeder primary schools were not in that group, so the collaboration facilitated by the previous membership and activities was no longer so easy to access.

Martin did not get too involved in the centre's activities to build the capacity of the system through the prescribed principal readings and glossy documents. During those years, Martin was immersed in improving his own school, which at that time was deemed to be underperforming. *"Personally, I didn't relate to it. At that time, 2008, 2009, 2010, our school was pulling itself up by the bootstraps from being an underperforming school"*. His focus was on his own patch, working closely with a leadership coach to establish an orderly environment and then rebuild the learning culture of the school. Martin's focus was on building teacher teams, explicit instruction and clear learning intentions and success criteria. He found activities such as developing a network strategic plan, an artificial exercise that was a distraction. *"I found it a bit of an artificial exercise really, maybe too much time was spent on it. In the end we all want the same things, improved outcomes for students...Let's just get on with the work"*. Martin expressed his strongly held view that every school is different and each unique context needs to be recognised.

Martin considered himself, like other principals, to be a very practical person; he knew what needed to be done and was, at times, frustrated by regional staff pushing ideas that may have been the flavour of the month but not relevant to his school's goals. He concentrated on what needed to change within his own school and could not help feeling cynical when seeing the expense and lavishness demonstrated at such events as the *Big Days Out*. *"There was a bit of cynicism about that. We thought, wow, look at all this money, that's interesting, and some of it was great*

stuff". However, he considered that the work done by the centre at the time, to build leadership at capacity within the system, was of a high calibre and enduring. *"The work they did on leadership was great, the articulation of that"*.

Therefore, Martin's recollection of the value of the Regional Network related to his experience of the first network, which was overwhelmingly positive. Martin reminisced about the collegiality that was fostered. Sadly this collegiality fell away after the Regional Networks ended. Martin felt that was because the network relationship was the moderating influence. The change in culture at that time was a leap in faith, moving from what's best for me, to what is best for us. That relationship of trust and sharing began simply with the extending of invitations to visit each other's schools. It then moved to a deeper level of beginning to share data; however, the structure ended before that vision was realised. Martin did not believe that level of collaboration and trust happened any more. *"When you start sharing ideas and you say: Come to my school, and you build the relationship, enjoy other's company, have a bit of lunch together, and you rotate and talk about collaboration. And by collaboration, you're thinking about what's good for you and me, not just me. It's all about us together, for the students in this broader area and how do we make sure we don't have them falling through the cracks or coming up against bureaucratic walls"*.

Martin's perspective was that the principals and the relationships they forged were the driving force of the Regional Network. It was not the Regional Network Leader, who Martin did not regard as a particularly strong leader (this was also the case when he moved networks). *"We didn't have a particularly strong Regional Network Leader"*. Martin's experience was that the Regional Network Leader facilitated the meetings; they ran well and served to update principals on the latest

information from the centre. There was an openness and good input from the Executive and the Regional Network Leader worked together with them to bring the system's perspective and imperatives, but as a leader, the Regional Network Leader was not particularly strong. In this respect his perception was similar to that of Laura. Martin acknowledged that he was part of a system and that the system needed to drive the agenda. But for Martin the true leadership in his district came from the Regional Director who regularly attended the meetings. In Martin's mind every network had its unique challenges and needed to be able to find the best way to manage those challenges, with only broad-brush guidance from the centre. *"Because every network's needs and challenges, in every part of the world, are different. But we were getting some nice direction from the centre at that time. And in our case, unfortunately, it went a little too far"*.

In spite of this view, Martin acknowledged that the directive approach from the centre was the right approach for the times, *"It was on the money. I like that approach "* as long as the focus was not on *"micro-managing in peripheral areas"*. Martin's priority of improving student outcomes at his school led to him searching for his own solutions. He looked to schools in other regions that had been successful in improving their literacy standards and employed his own coach to help him reach those goals, using a Commonwealth funding grant to achieve that end. Six years down the track he still worked closely with that person and his school's outcomes are much improved. He is very proud of how far his school had come in that time, but that was something he had achieved outside any Regional Network activity.

While Martin had remarked that he did not consider his Regional Network Leader to be a particularly strong leader and that he saw the times as being directive, he never felt that his autonomy as a principal had been impinged upon. However,

what he would have liked was more practical advice on how to achieve his school improvement goals, not policy-speak. So there were times when he wondered how that person became a network leader because he did not feel they displayed the practical school improvement knowledge that would have made the difference. *“To be an effective Regional Network Leader you need to understand school improvement at the theoretical level, you’ve got to have that, but if that’s all you know you are not going to be much use, I’ve got to tell you, and the people who breeze in with these ideas and breeze out. Well, go away, you are of limited value”*. Principals need a lot of encouragement and practical assistance, not theories. Martin, however, did not let this get in the way of what he knew was best for his school; he knew when to ignore the system’s directives and when to comply. That ability to know when to work around the system helped him address the specific and immediate problems he was encountering with his own school’s lack of achievement.

Martin remembered that era of educational reform as an important time in which the system was on the edge of something. *“We were on the edge of something special that had not been done before in our system; bits came out but the best was yet to come”*. There was a strong emphasis on collaboration and improving teaching and learning. Martin expressed his view that *“the best was yet to come”*, but the momentum was thwarted by the changed policy directions that left schools in a holding position for a couple of years, following a change of government and cessation of the Regional Networks. Martin regarded the time that followed as a period of *“suspended animation”*, waiting for the next rollout.

Martin believed that the lessons to be learned from the Regional Network structure were about the benefits of being strategic and not haphazard. If things were

going well they should not be disrupted. *“If there is a shift away from autonomy to more direction from the centre it should be done strategically”*. He would have liked Regional Network Leaders to be more involved in supporting and encouraging actions that would lead to improvement, rather than presenting data and walking away. *“They weren’t much chop, really”*.

Martin regarded the focus on data that was a feature of that period as an important change in direction that introduced a higher level of knowledge to the practice of schools, and Martin believed that needed to continue. The benefit of being part of a system was the ability to share that data and strategies for improvement. Martin would have liked to see more of that and for the Regional Network Leader to *“get more involved at a deeper level”*.

Melissa's Story

Melissa's story brings a unique perspective to the Regional Network structure because she held the position of the Regional Network Chair and in that capacity had a very close relationship with the RNL. Her role juggled that of representing the interests of principal members of the network while communicating the system's message. The role of Chair involved leading the Executive in developing agendas in line with the new policy directions. She was the figurehead of the network and had a clearer understanding of the rationale behind the new structure, which at times required her to negotiate with the Executive about the centre's priorities. Chairpersons were involved in additional training and consultation with the centre prior to the former networks merging to the structure.

Melissa understood that the system's vision for alignment required a directed approach to develop common understandings, language and goals. As the Chair of the new network Melissa had to negotiate and manage the interests of her members while working with the centre through the RNL. While acknowledging that these challenges were a feature of the time, Melissa valued the high quality professional learning that she was able to access over that period which developed her as a leader beyond her own school.

Melissa, a primary school principal, had been in the role for over seven years when the Regional Networks were introduced. In recalling that period Melissa remembered that it was *"a good time in education for our leadership and our schools"* - a time when much was achieved in the area of professional growth, alignment and collaboration. *"It was quite a directed experience from the centre so*

the Regional Network Leaders came in with being an agenda to improve student learning outcomes and the leadership within the 25-26 schools for which they were responsible". Melissa was quite open about the fact that there was a lot of direction from the centre with the aim of lifting performance across the system. As with many former networks that merged to create groups that were similar in size, this was also the case for Melissa's network. She spoke about the fact that the priority of the Executive was initially to build relationships to allow the new structure to settle.

Initially when the two former networks merged there were many activities organised to build collegiality, respect and learning how to best work together. *"We did a lot of activities to develop collegiality, getting to know you. We had a Melbourne Cup theme because it was around November when it started"*. Later there was an expectation that a network strategic plan was developed based on the data gathered from across all the schools. That caused a bit of friction, Melissa recalled, because the special schools had different priorities and the data from the mainstream settings did not have much relevance to their priorities. This point about special settings was elaborated upon in Jennie's story. Although Jennie belonged to a different Regional Network, her issues appear to be shared by principals of special settings in other networks.

Generally Melissa found the whole issue of the data-sharing agenda challenging. *"There were a lot of principals who felt that it (the agenda) was too directed, that it was not so much network and principal-driven, but you know, an outside system-driven interference"*. To deal with this issue as a network, the Executive tried to find some broad directions that would have been of some relevance to everyone. In my own experience as an RNL the issue of data sharing was also a contentious one, which led to the development of data-sharing protocols

by all the Regional Networks in SMR. These protocols assisted with the development of trust within the new structure but it took time for new relationships to form.

The noticeable difference for Melissa with the new structure was that the agenda was driven by the RNL. While Melissa did not have an issue with this personally, she was aware that *“some really resented having a Regional Network Leader telling them what to do and driving the agenda, they wanted more autonomy, but they also acknowledged that they found the role to be supportive and they got a lot of support and our Regional Network Leader was particularly supportive”*. However Melissa in her role as Chair, pointed out that the setting of the agenda occurred in collaboration with the Executive committee.

Melissa did enjoy a positive relationship with her RNL. She respected her and remarked that the RNL had a clear view of how she would proceed, building relationships and connecting with the new network members by getting to know their school contexts. The RNL worked closely with the Executive committee, which was regarded as a fair representation of the membership. Melissa's perception of the RNL was that *“she made a real effort to get to know every principal, visit all their schools, know about their schools, so as well as having all the data and everything, she also had a good contextual local knowledge”*. However not all principals interviewed for this study related well to their RNL and the relationship with, or perceived effectiveness of the RNL, affected a principal's connection to the network as is shown by Martin's story.

Melissa's role as Chair involved her in all aspects of network operations. But overwhelmingly, she remembered this time as a period of professional learning. This included sharing and being exposed to other schools' data, which was a new trend.

Melissa recalled the “*professional conversations, the development of leadership skills beyond my school in a structured and supportive way with somebody else who had broader experience of other schools*”. The sharing of data within the network environment was initially “*a little bit confronting*” for the network principals, but as protocols were put into place and trust and relationships grew the anxiety did abate. Melissa’s own school’s outcomes were around the middle of the field of amongst some very high performing schools, so she had a realistic perspective on the where things stood. “*We were travelling, you know, middle of the road, we still used a lot of strategies, a lot of walkthroughs and observations and the feedback that you would give to teachers and the discussions, and helped structure the conversations back at school with teachers*”.

Melissa spoke about the Regional Network period as a “*tiered approach*” to improving the system, supported by financial resources and personnel. She valued the Teaching and Learning Coaches that were assigned to the network and allocated to schools based on their data, however Melissa, as Chair, felt that it was tricky managing the allocation of coaches in making sure a school was amenable to that kind of assistance. It was at times like these that her role separated her from the other members of the network and she had to make decisions in consultation with the RNL about where resources should be placed. Sometimes the situation was delicate to manage.

Melissa spoke with pride about a network project that focused on mathematics improvement across the schools. As a result, a program of *Instructional Rounds* was introduced focused on mathematics teaching. The program involved small groups of the principals from within the network visiting classrooms in different schools and observing the teaching. This program continued over many

months and Melissa then adapted that program to peer observations back at her own school. Melissa added that the network achieved other valuable work over that time, such as the setting of enrolment protocols to manage the competitive nature of the enrolments.

Although it was a very directed time Melissa did not feel that this affected her autonomy as a principal. *"I didn't feel that there was any interruption or suspension of autonomy or something that blocked my autonomy. I felt that supported the work that you were doing because it gave you more opportunities to speak to other schools"*. On the contrary, she felt supported because the structure encouraged and facilitated professional growth, interaction with other schools, and offered specialist support through the availability of coaches. While the Regional Network Leader had the dual role of leading the network as well as being the line manager of the principals within it, Melissa did not see this as a problem. She equated this to her own role as leader of her school and that she was responsible for both the performance and professional development of her staff. *"I see it as similar to what I do at school. I am the line manager of my staff. I deliver and take them through professional development but I am also responsible for their performance reviews"*.

Melissa was positive about the role of RNL but she was aware that this was not the view of all her colleagues. She was honest about the range of views in her network agreeing that principals accepted the role with mixed feelings. Some resented the network leader driving the agenda and they wanted more autonomy. However, Melissa recalled that these critics also acknowledged that the RNL role was a supportive one and that their own RNL was particularly helpful to them. This point picks up the idea previously raised and repeated in other stories that the quality

of the RNLs varied and this impacted on how principals felt about their Regional Network.

The aspects that Melissa valued most about this period were the professional conversations and the opportunity to develop leadership skills beyond the context of her own school. There was a clear expectation that principals were involved in professional reading and she did enjoy the learning and conversations that were generated. There were also many policy documents that supported the work of the system at the time that Melissa found to be a great help to her school, both in the areas of leadership development of staff and curriculum development. As an example she pointed to the *E5 Instructional Model* (DEECD, 2009a) document that became the backbone of her school's science curriculum.

On the subject of professional learning, Melissa also recalled the *Big Days Out* organised by the system to build the collective vision of principals across the state. Initially she regarded these days as a novel experience and appreciated the exposure to the high quality speakers, including the Department leaders who were strong and passionate about the system's directions. Conversations were challenging and many good practices and high expectations were set in place. *"Initially when we had high quality speakers leading the day, you know leaders from the Department taking roles and leading the day, Darrell Fraser, strong and passionate about the direction he saw, leading and challenging discussions around the table, you know, I thought it set a lot of good practices in place and expectations"*.

Later Melissa thought that things got out of hand. She referred to the *Ultraset* launch, and the bus that rolled out onto the stage (see the explanation of the *Ultraset* bus, outlined at the beginning of this chapter). Melissa saw this as a ridiculous waste of money as well as an ill-advised plan in which all the principal class were at the

launch while their teachers remained back at school to manage the situation when the *Ultraset* crashed and could not be accessed. This created a lot of cynicism in principals about the system's extravagance at the expense of schools' budgets and this theme is repeated in many of the other principals' stories.

In spite of such questionable practices, looking back over that time, Melissa saw it as a highly supportive period that gave principals and schools lots of opportunities for professional support with clear direction. *"I don't have any negative experience of that time, although it was a lot of hard work"*. In summarising the influence of that time Melissa said, *"It developed me as a leader within the network ... whereas in the previous structure, I just organised meetings and got speakers and tried to be supportive"*.

Melvin's Story

The importance of system alignment and having a common language is the dominant thinking underlying Melvin's perceptions of and support for Regional Networks. This is significant because Melvin was one of most experienced principals that were interviewed for this study. He had been the principal of three primary schools over his 20+ years as a principal. A distinctive feature of Melvin's story was the sense of commitment to belonging to the system and working as part of a team. Melvin definitely saw this as a supportive influence on his role that was not mitigated by his 13 years as principal in his current setting when the Regional Networks were introduced. Melvin remained convinced that a systems thinking approach was necessary to improving the learning outcomes within a district. Because of his vast experience of the system, which not unlike that of Robert's experience whose story is yet to be told, I considered Melvin together with Robert, to be the 'elder statesmen' of the participants that were interviewed. Their attitudes to a systems approach are very similar.

It was inspirational to think that in spite of his long career within the government system, Melvin's enthusiasm for making a difference to students' outcomes had not waned. Melvin's confidence in his own abilities, derived from his extensive experience, allowed him to separate himself from central directives and pay them lip service when he did not see the relevance to his own school community. Yet he still considered himself to hold a strong allegiance to the system. Melvin had seen many initiatives come and go but he did feel a genuine connection to the Regional Network structure, particularly because the meetings were focused around collective responsibility for students within the network schools.

As with several of the other principals whose stories have been reconstructed, Melvin's spoke about two different cultures that merged for the membership of the new network and he acknowledged that it took a while for things to come together. Melvin had a clear understanding of the purpose behind the change and was supportive of it. *"It would be fair to say that underlying all that was the notion of collective responsibility for learning and wellbeing, so that sort of had a sense of moral imperative to it"*. The grouping of around 25 schools organised along local government lines made sense to him and Melvin understood that the vision for the new structure was a significant change from the culture that had previously existed. Previously people would meet and *"have breakfast together"* and so on, but it was not a formal thing. Melvin indicated that the notion of collective responsibility, which brought with it a certain formality, was not a bad thing because *"it gave everybody a language"*. Therefore, the new network was initially involved in the formalities of developing values, protocols, and a strategic plan and so on *"like all things it's how it is played out"*.

For Melvin this new direction was not a disruption as he had always taken the view that individuals working by themselves were not as effective as a team; no one had all the answers on their own. Melvin recalled that within the 25 schools subgroups were formed based on geography and although this interfered with his existing sister school relationship, he worked around it because he saw the value in the new structure and wanted to support it.

Melvin was a member of the initial Executive committee and described the rotation arrangement which was put into place for the members of the Executive. Melvin was not initially elected to his position as people were asked if they could go on and then they would rotate off to give someone else a turn. *"They would call it an*

election but it wasn't really. Can you get on there? OK. I'll go first and then rotate off".

Melvin stressed the importance of good relationships as being integral to any structure and he considered the relationship between the Regional Network Leader and the Executive to be critical to the success of the network. If that relationship were not there the network would have been in a state of tension. *"I think that ultimately it was the relationship between the network leader and the Executive that was probably one of the critical relationships. So the network leader had a certain set of parameters and frameworks in which to do things and the Executive had some of those but it also had its own imperatives. You know, the longstanding one of collegiality between principals, while that might not have been on anybody's formal agenda".*

Melvin stressed that the strength of the network rested on the relationship between the principals and the network leader. There were certain parameters the leader was expected to work towards and the Executive had to comply with, but there was also the long-standing collegiality between principals that was not on a formal agenda. Collegiality was a very important factor for Melvin who saw the size of the Regional Network structure as favourable to building successful relationships and relational trust.

Melvin described the relationship between the Executive and the network leader as *"symbiotic"*; they pooled their resources to build collective efficacy. He recalled that in the first 12 months the Regional Network Leader worked hard to build those relationships; it was manageable because of the size of the network. *"When there was one network leader with 25 schools, there was a chance, that 1 to 25 relationship, could build relational trust"*. Melvin expanded his view on this

when he said that *“the system is built on relationships and I felt that symbolically and culturally 1 to 25, set a framework for relationships to develop, and I thought that was really powerful and really important”*.

After his initial term on the Executive Melvin went on to lead the *Instructional Rounds* group, which was a particular initiative of the network aimed at lifting the quality of Mathematics teaching. He saw his role as that of a mentor. He was studying for his “*Masters*” degree at the time and had done some research into this process, which involved a group of about six principals participating in classroom observations in each other’s schools. Involvement in this exercise enabled a unique relationship to develop between those principals. *“I had a core group of about six schools who had a real interest and desire and commitment to see if we could build our own set of Instructional Rounds for leadership skills.”* Melvin spoke about the way that the *Instructional Rounds* group helped to build the skills of network principals and he noticed how the casual conversations of the principals involved changed. He felt that there was an enormous sense of mutual trust that existed within this group. *“We had a set of relationships quite different from the others”*. He explained the close bond he shared with that smaller group as follows. *“If you haven’t been engaged in the conversation, you don’t really get the depth of the struggle. If you are not engaged in the struggle, you are just hearing the end result and you don’t actually get the real learning”*.

Melvin definitely saw himself as a systems man. *“I think my career and experience of twenty something years as a principal, has led me to that point. Yeah, you can say that I am a system man, a believer in the system, the greater good”*. The professional learning push came from the system and there were huge opportunities for principals to be involved in high-level development. Melvin recalled his summer

institutes at Harvard, (see the explanation at the beginning of this chapter) and how that experience opened his eyes to the bigger picture of school improvement. *“Huge opportunity to get outside your own neighbourhood and look at the same struggles in a different context, it really opened my eyes”.*

Melvin was very involved in professional development at the central level, working closely with key academics such as Richard Elmore, Patrick Griffin who were recruited by the centre to build principals' leadership and curriculum knowledge) and the development of the *E5* document. He regarded the expectation by the system that principals become readers and lifelong learners as a fantastic thing. The provision of professional reading books to principals each year, *“symbolically...set the tone”*. He was not sure how that all filtered down, but Melvin certainly engaged with the readings and the system's publications.

In considering the role of the Regional Network Leader as his line manager, Melvin had the attitude that *“we all wear different hats”* at times and we need acknowledge when we put a different hat on. In his role as principal he faced the same situation of being responsible for the performance and development of his staff. He welcomed constructive feedback and knew that he was running a successful school that supported the system's directions. He saw the relationship between the Leader and himself, as a good one. *“I did expect that if I hadn't analysed my data sets, that I would be challenged and I welcomed that, or at least, if not challenged, divergent thoughts or possibilities. So I didn't have a problem with that”*. In expanding on that relationship Melvin summed it up this way:

“What the hell, it was a good relationship!”. He never felt that the network structure impacted on his autonomy. *“I felt an enormous sense of trust existed,*

mutual trust". For him autonomy was not the issue. "You've got to give up a few things to get a few things. I'm not sure what I gave up yet".

However, Melvin was aware that not everyone in the network felt that way. Some people were involved in difficult conversations with the network leader about their school's performance, but that was not Melvin's experience. He imagined, however, that those personal tensions that needed to be managed by the Regional Network Leader were difficult. Melvin believed that there was a fine line between pushing and supporting. At times he, personally, became the sounding board for some of those principals expressing their dissatisfaction and he felt that he could be a supportive ear because of the relationships that existed. Although his involvement in the Regional Network required time out of his school the bigger picture was the collective good. "*I think everybody saw the greater good*". The experiences he brought back to his own school as a result of the involvement in the network made it a "*win-win*" situation.

In recalling that time Melvin valued the focused learning and moral imperative that marked that period of educational reform. He believed that it certainly brought about greater alignment and there are still some remnants of that structure in existence today. It was not a "*Utopian*" structure, but it achieved a changed mindset. "*No structure is ever perfect...but it definitely moved it along*". Melvin believed that in the end everybody in the network saw the greater good and understood that even the high-performing schools in the network had students at risk. Melvin regrets that "*the plug was pulled*" on the structure before it really had an impact below the principal class. The real power of the changes would have been that the work filtered down to teachers in schools. This started to happen but it didn't

get that far. *“We understood each other, we shared data, it was open and transparent, nobody broke the protocols and nobody shared outside it”.*

Sadly Melvin felt that much of the achievement over that period was lost. The region no longer aggregated data in the way it did at the height of the Regional Network structure. This, in Melvin's opinion, was a shame. He felt that a *“great missed opportunity”* had been lost in abandoning the momentum of the reforms. There was *“a real sense of unity”* that was generated across the network at that time; data was shared and it was open and transparent. It was a *“time of challenge”* and the things that came out of that period, Melvin believed, still stood up today, such as the notion of *“evidence-based decision-making”*, which *“had its roots in the sharing of common data, which is lost”*.

Paul's Story

For Paul, good and trustful relationships with colleagues were paramount, no matter what type of collaborative structure was in place, therefore Paul's story largely centres around the relationships within the Regional Network experience. In 2008, when the Regional Network structure was introduced, Paul had been the principal of his current primary school for eight years. His view was that *"networks will only work if there are good relationships between the Principal Class Officers involved and we were really, really lucky to have a fantastic network"*. So for Paul the notion of *"fantastic"* meant that the relationships within the structure were supportive and respectful.

The restructure of previous networks affected Paul in separating him from many of his colleagues, so he recalled that there were a lot of relationships that needed to be built. But he was very proactive about this. *"Most of the schools in the new network came from the previous ---- area so I missed out on being with a lot of my former colleagues. So I did find when the new networks were formed there were a lot of relationships that needed to be built. I had to forge a lot of new links"*. Paul formed a strong bond with the schools closest in proximity to his own school.

The trusted relationships that existed between that small group of schools began prior to the Regional Network structure being introduced because those schools within the same neighbourhood were naturally drawn together. When that little cluster of schools at *"the northern end"* of the geographic area was absorbed into the Regional Network, the relationship was formalised. *"My initial experiences of the new network was that schools at the southern end tended to stick together and even though we have fantastic relationships now, the closeness of the local schools can be shown in the formation of a local cluster, the ----cluster, which we've had for*

the last six or seven years as a subset of the Regional Network". That relationship was "cemented with the formation of the Regional Network because as the rump of us that were transferred to the new ---- network knew each other better than the other schools in that new network. So we tended to work more closely together".

Paul believed that the new structure of Regional Networks fostered collegiality and several activities were organised in those early months to get everybody together. Paul fondly recalled excursions to New Zealand and Perth, which he organised with other colleagues. That was his contribution to the new structure. *"Some of us including myself organised a trip to Perth and a trip to New Zealand, and we invited our colleagues from neighbouring networks and it was a great way to get to know each other".*

Paul chose not to be on the Executive committee because his own school was growing at a great rate and he needed to have his focus there. *"I was in a rapidly growing school and was very busy with that".* His workload back at school was *"60-70 hours a week"* and he wasn't able to take on the responsibility of an executive role. Rather than join the Executive Paul's contribution to the network was still significant in organising the network conferences and, as he saw it, this was a great way to get to know people across the new network. He certainly found the governance structure of the network to be open, and members were encouraged to join the Executive. However, the timing for that kind of involvement was not right for him. In his view the Executive drove the network's agenda, *"the impetus came from us"*, but the Regional Network Leader was a close partner.

Paul always fostered relationships with colleagues and this approach did not change when it came to the Regional Network Leader. *"The important thing for me was that I had a Regional Network Leader who trusted me and who I could trust and*

who I knew I could ring up, chat socially and then be able to ask questions". The relationship with the Regional Network leader was positive and supportive. Paul felt that he could pick up the phone at any time and discuss an issue related to his school. Not only was he able to gain good and reliable advice but he was also able to access the wider regional team, which was important to him. In Paul's view the Regional Network structure helped keep principals informed, reinforcing the idea that the RNL was a conduit for communication from the centre and Paul always felt that he would learn something new at the meetings. *"The Regional Network structure helped keep us informed and I'd turn up to a meeting and think, What am I going to learn today? Most of these sessions, we were learning new things"*.

Some aspects of the Regional Network, however, Paul saw as just a *"political"* exercise. He felt this way about the development of the network strategic plan, which did not have any particular impact on his own school. *"I sat through many meetings on this. To be honest, I could see the political impetus behind this. Most of what we did was common sense; there were a lot of motherhood statements"*. Paul worked with his leadership team to examine their data sets and described himself as a *"data nerd"*. He could see what needed improvement and he did not feel that he needed a network strategic plan to illuminate his direction. Some of his colleagues were more positive about the subject of the strategic plan and Paul recalled that some principals saw it as an impetus to work more collegiately. However, Paul was already doing that with his own smaller cluster of local schools; for him it was not a new approach.

Paul believed that principals gave their first loyalty to their own schools, and then to the system. *"I think most principals see their major loyalty to their school first, then the system"*. Therefore, when it came to the network's strategic plan, Paul

knew that principals would choose what was relevant for their context. They made it work for them and in their own way they were building the system by focusing on what needed improvement within their schools. *“They would pick and choose what was relevant for them”*.

In remembering that time Paul saw it as a period that was heading towards goal congruence, but he saw this work as not quite getting there. Paul's perception was that *“there was some goal congruence from where I sit. The conversations that were started at the network level helped to promote that by building collegiality and trust”*.

Paul saw some of the attempts at capacity building as too much. He recalled that time as one of *“information overload”* and *“too much, too soon”*. Looking back Paul felt that he probably *“should have taken more out of it”*, but the speed with which the imperatives came, was at times, *“too much”*. Nevertheless what Paul did value was that it was a time when principals moved from being *“insular”* to talking a lot more to each other. He also enjoyed the focus on data and the sharing of data across the network. The data-analysis aspect of professional learning promoted through the network was something Paul enjoyed and related to. He *“never felt”* that his autonomy as a principal was *“compromised”* by the Regional Network agenda. In fact he felt fortunate that he has always had good regional leaders. *“I have always been able to have the on-the-record, off-the -record conversations with them; if you can't have those they are not good leaders”*. In his eyes, the Regional Network structure was the closest that the system ever got to a *“Professional Learning Community model, but we never quite got there”*.

In thinking about the demise of the Regional Networks, Paul felt that the joint focus on initiatives and the collegiality that was generated, through that period, had

been lost. “ *It did cause principals to talk to each other a lot more and we are still reaping the benefits of that. I’d be horrified if we went back to the insular ways that existed when I first became a principal*”. While the less-directive approach that followed meant a little more independence for schools, there was no longer the opportunity for the same level of collegiality because of the changed structure and focus. “*We probably gained a bit of independence but that is not necessarily a good thing because we don’t have the same opportunity for collegiality that we used to have*”.

Paul explained that the move to larger networks of schools that followed the Regional Network structure, without the same coordinating role by an RNL, made it difficult to keep up connections. “*I think it’s both geography and having someone to coordinate or facilitate it*”.

Paul emphasised, through the interview, the importance of relationships as a supporting factor in his role as principal. He actively fostered those relationships with regional personnel and it is interesting that he saw the onus on building those relationships as falling on him. His belief was that “ *you only get support if you ask for it. I always made it my business to keep the Regional Network Leader in the loop so they knew what was going on in my school and also so that others in the regional leadership team would also know about my school but I got the impression that if I hadn’t worked on those relationships with them they wouldn’t have had the time to do that with me*”.

Robert's Story

In recalling the time of Regional Networks, Robert's experience was that it was a unique period of the most purpose he had ever seen in the education agenda. It was a time of clarity, alignment and learning. *"In my nearly 45 years in education, it is the time I've seen that had the most purpose in education, everybody was basically on the same tram, whether you agreed with the philosophy or not, or the way it was handled, the goal was always pretty clear"*. Robert, like Melvin, was a very experienced primary school principal. He had 18 years of experience when the Regional Networks were introduced in 2008 and, like Melvin, his current school was his third principalship. Robert's story has much in common with Melvin's experience and highlights the value of a systems thinking approach to school improvement and capacity building.

For Robert the Regional Network experience was a very positive one. *"I thought those three years were very good because there was a definite focus on sharing ideas and a really clear idea of improving learning, not only in your own school but in the network as well"*. Robert enjoyed the system's focus on improving student learning across a district and saw this as a very *"innovative"* time that was characterised by professional learning and sharing. Robert felt that when the Regional Network structure ended after three years, the system and the network lost its focus. He recalls that all the people at the top of the system were replaced and everything lost momentum. *"When that ended it just lost focus"*. Robert became disillusioned and this changed his attitude to attending network meetings, feeling that he would be better off staying back at school and getting his work done. As a result, after the Regional Network structure ended, Robert and his Assistant Principal

attended meetings on a rotational basis. *"When I saw the agenda for the meeting I thought I would be better off in the school getting stuff done"*.

Robert recalled how the Regional Networks were set up from the mandated merger of two networks, but that did not worry him. Robert regarded the merger as one of *"geography"* to align the Regional Networks with local government boundaries. He viewed this as fair and knew he would keep up with his old contacts while making lots of new contacts through the merger. Initially Robert had his doubts about how the merger would work but the Regional Network Leader who had been appointed, for whom Robert has great admiration, made it clear that the success of the network was her top priority and she worked hard to build relationships and trust. *"I had my doubts at the time as to how well that would work but ---- was appointed as our Regional Network Leader and I have great admiration for them because she put education and the wellbeing of the principals in her group, at the top of her priority list and after a while we realised that she was interested in kids, she was interested in education and would go in to bat for us"*.

Robert also acknowledged that the success of a network would depend on the quality of the leader. *"It would have depended on the person but our Regional Network Leader was a very good facilitator so I saw her as holding quite an important role"*. The quality of the network leader was not an issue for his network and the Executive and leader worked harmoniously to achieve the agreed priorities.

Although the Regional Network Leader was technically Robert's line-manager, he never looked at it that way. In his mind they were peers with different roles in the system to fulfil. *"I saw that more as a peer to peer thing"*. He never felt that his autonomy as a principal was compromised within the Regional Network structure. He could easily separate out in his mind the network business and that of

his own school, when they were not in a direct line. *"I always saw us as equals, I never saw the Regional Network Leader as an authority figure and the Regional Network Leader never ever made it like that"*.

Robert's view was that if a directive worked for his school he would do it; if it didn't, then he would not. This seemed to be a common but unspoken rule amongst principals and it is also echoed in the stories of Martin, Paul, Melvin and Sam. Robert said, *"I've always felt fairly autonomous and I have always been fortunate to have supportive school councils, to have really good school council presidents. So, you obviously have to act within the Department guidelines, but as far as the Department is concerned, I have always felt autonomous and felt I could operate the school pretty much as I want to so long as it was within the guidelines"*.

Robert thought that principals and teachers as a group, liked to do the right thing and that perhaps, at times, they should be *"a little more independent"*. So Robert's stance was that he implemented system directions that worked for his school and ignored what did not. *"I think I had the courage or stupidity to ignore any directive that could have been interpreted as a directive that I didn't agree with"*. His school was already achieving high outcomes so he knew he was on safe ground. But this attitude reflected the confidence that Robert had in his own ability as an experienced principal. He knew the system and how to navigate his way through it.

In his own search for excellence Robert's school went down the road of International School accreditation and this opened up a range of new and different experiences and contacts, independent of the Regional Network. But the two paths were not in conflict and further enriched Robert's professional expertise. The culture of sharing within the network allowed schools to showcase their specialties, which Robert also did, *"other schools did presentations on their areas of expertise...it was*

good for information sharing. That's gone now". Such collaboration and sharing was good for everyone and schools within the network became better informed about each other's programs. In Robert's view the Regional Network ran well and he believed that it benefited the 25 schools that were members of it. He enjoyed the discussions with colleagues and brought back ideas to his own school as a result. Robert felt that he learnt a lot of things from such interactions in spite of his extensive experience; what to do and what not to do.

Robert was a member of the Executive of the Regional Network when it was first constituted. *"I always did play a role"*. Initially, he was invited to be on the first executive committee of the new Regional Network by the leader and after that there was a rotation of primary, secondary and special school principals on the committee. There were several portfolio groups set up within the structure and Robert became the leader of the Teaching and Learning group, which was further divided into a literacy and numeracy strain. This allowed for representation from every school in the network. As the priority was to improve learning, it was beneficial for every school to be involved. A project of *Instructional Rounds* became the focus for improved numeracy teaching. Robert found this exercise very valuable and he later adapted the process to run within his own school.

Robert enjoyed the focus on teaching and learning that had become the priority of the network because at heart he still considered himself a teacher and he found it refreshing to see that focus coming from the centre. The network developed mutual goals based on the data and that was formalised in a strategic plan for the network. When that idea was first announced people were not pleased because they felt they already had a strategic plan for their own school and didn't need another one. *"I can remember when it was first announced everyone went: Oh No, What a*

pain to have to do this! We did it in our own school, we don't want to do it in the network too". But Robert recalled that the Executive wrote the plan, so in the end it wasn't onerous for the rest of the principals; the Executive presented it and said, *"Well, here it is"*. It gave individual schools a very broad network goal that could broadly relate to their own school, and it did give them a focus for the *Instructional Rounds*, which was improved numeracy teaching. So the Executive did the first plan and then after the first year the plan was reviewed and modified, which was not a big job.

With regard to the way in which contentious matters were handled within the network, Robert believed that this was done through discussion and consensus. Robert recalled the first time the issue of data sharing was broached; it was difficult for those schools whose data was not so good. This was resolved through discussion and the development of protocols. In the end, while a few people were not completely happy, they did agree. *"People during those three years, and I'm not saying it was paradise, but if people disagreed with something at the time, they knew they had the ability to speak up and people would listen to them"*.

When the data was presented to the network the reluctant principals could see that even in the higher performing schools data was variable. School contexts needed to be considered and one could not change the family backgrounds that impacted on the data. There was a range of socio-economic variation with the network schools but everyone had areas for improvement. That knowledge helped with those principals who had been reluctant to share their data to feel more comfortable about sharing that data. *"It was dealt with through discussion and there were those who were for it and those who were against it, but pretty much consensus at the end, everybody said OK"*.

There were things about that period that Robert was critical of in spite of his respect for the Deputy Secretary who was driving the reform agenda. Robert identified “*those dreadful Big Days Out*” and the *Ultraset* push, as cases in point. The *Ultraset* never became a big focus in his school but the day it really lost credibility was at the *Big Day Out* and the spectacle created, when all the central leaders got off the *Ultraset* bus that had been driven onto the stage at the conference centre. Robert regarded the biggest mistake made by the centre at the time was in expecting all the principals to be at the *Ultraset* launch in town instead of being back at school with their teachers. Robert admitted that he is not particularly computer-savvy and tended to get frustrated when things didn’t work, so the *Ultraset* “*died a pretty natural death in this school*”, reflecting Robert’s view that he would do what was best for his school in spite of the system’s directives.

Robert believed that the success of the network depended a lot on the leadership of the network, but his personal experience of that was positive. His perception was that generally the Regional Network Leaders who were appointed were experienced principals. He believed that lots of good choices were made. There was a focus on education and a lot of good will; principals wanted the Regional Networks to succeed and the structure was inclusive. Because of its size Assistant Principals were also included in the network, therefore the capacity of the system was constantly being built. Robert would have liked to see the Regional Networks maintained rather than being abandoned, just for the sake of a change. It was a short-sighted view taken by the new government who “*didn’t bother to look for the value, to look around at what was happening*”, to see the value in what was there. It was “*change for change’s sake. I would have liked to see the Regional Networks maintained because I think they had a lot to offer, a lot of opportunities, mostly for*

principal class staff, but for staff in schools too". Robert appreciated the connections with local schools that were a feature of that time. *"It was great to see other schools and have other schools visit you, and for a while, there was quite a bit of transparency about what happened in schools and with the data. You don't see that these days"*.

Sam's Story

Sam's over-arching memory of this period was that it was a time when there was a strong sense of vision from the Department, and a sense that everyone could develop their capacities to deliver better outcomes for students. *"It was a time of developing capacity for principals particularly in the area of teaching and learning"*.

That approach made a lot of sense to Sam who had been principal of his primary school for seven years when the Regional Network structure was introduced. Sam recalled this period with great fondness because he saw it as a time of real purpose, of setting collegiate goals and developing a vision through collaboration. Sam also recognised that there were principals who needed to change and become more accountable, so to have the vision set out explicitly for everyone added a clear direction that had not existed before. *"I thought it was fabulous. I felt for the first time that there was a sense of direction, there was a sense that we were professionals"*. For Sam the affirmation by the system of high levels of professional expertise as being an essential component of system wide school improvement was a new and encouraging step. But Sam also spoke about the variation in the quality of RNLs when his network was changed for a second time.

But Sam's experience also reflected the arbitrary nature of decision-making by system leaders that impacted negatively on his new network. After a while Sam's Regional Network was again re-formed, which was a setback. This was similar to the situation that occurred for Martin and both Sam and Martin believed that such re-structures create a negative impact in both cases. *"I think our Regional Network Leader ended up going somewhere else and we got a different Regional Network Leader and that had an impact on our network, no doubt, because we then had to re-group and re-establish what we had already done"*. Sam believed that the

Department tried to engineer a network in which there was a combination of schools, not just struggling schools. He formed this view because the geographic arrangement of the newly, mandated structure did not logically follow geographic boundaries. This meant that the re-constituted group had to re-establish the culture and virtually start again. *“Well, what it did was, it had the effect of sucking the life out of some things we were doing and where we were heading, I suppose having to re-start again”*. The first Regional Network Leader went somewhere else and a new person was appointed. Sam felt this made a difference because of the quality of leader, *“it makes a difference who the leader is, a huge difference”*. From Sam’s perspective it affected the levels of support and the way in which information was communicated to the membership. Sam recalled that the first Regional Network Leader was very good at that and he brought a lot of energy to the network. Sam went on to add that, then of course, things changed once more and the whole structure of Regional Networks was abandoned. *“Just as we were getting back with that, I think the new government said: Well, all bets are off”*.

Sam had been a member of the Executive just as things were changing and the new structure of Regional Networks was being implemented. Sam joked about the way he ended up on the Executive; *“everyone else stepped back!”* Nevertheless, he was happy to be on that committee and the Network Chairperson drove that agenda. Within that structure, Sam recalls, the Regional Network Leader worked closely with the Executive, assisting with the setting of agendas and bringing the system perspective to the table. But he considered the Executive to be a driving factor of the network. Sam described a sub-group with the Regional Network that met independently of the formal meetings; it was the collegiate arm of the network where issues could be raised to put to system leaders for clarification. This

arrangement appeared to be distinctive to Sam's Regional Network and could be seen to bridge the gap between the former structure, which focused on collegiality, and the new Regional Network structure, which focused on system improvement. By including the collegiate sub-group as an additional structure, there was compensation for the lack of collegiality in the formal agenda of the Regional Network and this may have been a vehicle for appeasing principals who did not agree with the new directive approach.

Sam described the first Regional Network Leader as a *"hugely energetic person and he brought things for us to consider"* and he saw the structure as one that encouraged communication. *"There was a sense that the meetings were an opportunity to look at systemic developments, data from the system, looking at how educational directions should be, to the latest surveys, what does it look like? What is it telling us, how can we make sense of it?"* The formal arm of network meetings at that time concentrated on a process of classroom observations called *Instructional Rounds*. That was the business end of the school improvement agenda for the network at that time *"that meant we were working together and that built collegiality"*.

In that regard Sam's experience of the Regional Network Leader role was that it was a supportive role for principals and schools. Sam never felt that his autonomy as a principal was hindered. Although the Regional Network Leader was his line manager, Sam described the relationship as respectful and professional. *"I didn't feel that my autonomy was affected. I actually felt supported because I feel that I am part of the system and I don't believe that I can go off and do what I like"*. There was no interference in the business of his school, although constructive suggestions could be made during the performance review process. Sam described

his relationship with his Regional Network Leader as a “*professional relationship that was a respectful one. Yeah, without being buddy-buddy. We weren’t great mates and we didn’t go out together, it was a professional relationship. I respected the work he did and hopefully, he respected the work I did. So, that’s how it was*”.

Some aspects of the network’s agenda were not as relevant to Sam. He thought that the development of a network strategic plan was probably not as relevant to the individual schools because each school had its own priorities. This was a common thought expressed by all the principals who were interviewed. With regard to how relevant the strategic plan was to Sam’s school he replied that it was not relevant, “*However, it did provide broad network focus, which was to improve literacy and numeracy*”. It gave everyone something “*to work on together*” and it became the focus for *Instructional Rounds*.

Sam recalled the many documents generated by the centre to support professional growth within the system. He found some more relevant than others because his school had adopted an international curriculum focus. More relevant was the *Developmental Framework for School Leaders* (DEECD, 2007b) and the leadership structure based on Sergiovanni’s (2007b) model. This was adopted by the system at the time and Sam found this a valuable resource, which stimulated discussion and reflection. Some of the principal readings were also very useful in crystallising the concept and challenges faced by principals as educational leaders. Sam believed that such texts united principals in the essential conversations. Sam pointed at one of the principal readings *Leadership on the Line* (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) and remarked that the book was about leaders needing to be brave. “*And you know, sometimes you have to be. Sometimes you have to do things or make decisions that are not going to be popular*”. That book really struck a chord with Sam.

Sam was very disappointed when the Regional Network structure was no longer seen to be valuable and was superseded by what was seen to be a laissez-faire approach. *“the sense particularly when the new government came in, they didn’t appreciate the system. They said you are all independent, do your own thing if you want to. Now we are going back the other way again”*. He felt deflated and devalued, thinking that he would just concentrate on his own school. Sam summed up the period of educational reforms which gave birth to Regional Networks, as *“one of the golden eras in education”*.

It was a time of strong vision when the system connected everyone together through a culture of knowledge creation and sharing. *“We had support, we had a vision that came all the way down, that we could connect with. I certainly felt connected to it”*. Even now Sam feels nostalgic about that time which he remembers as having a strong connection to system priorities. From his perspective the Regional Network Leader played a critical role in *“connecting us to the region”* and the centre. *“I have a real nostalgia for that period. Nostalgia because that was the time when we worked together, we had direction from our leaders, we were working together”*.

Recapitulation

This project presents a phenomenological study of 10 principals’ perceptions of Regional Networks. In this chapter, those perceptions were presented as the researcher’s interpretation of the lived experience through the reconstructed stories. It is an attempt to come to an essential understanding of the experience from the perspective of each participant. These stories form a precedent to the thematic analysis of transcripts that follows in Chapter 6 and 7 under the headings of themes

that appeared to assist or hinder principals in their work. However, prior to this thematic analysis, Chapter 5 provides an expanded analysis of three extended extracts of principals' transcripts which highlight the contradictory range of emotions generated by the Regional Network experience.

Chapter 5. Extended Analysis

“Functional stupidity contributes to maintaining and strengthening organizational order”. (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016 p. 1196).

This chapter demonstrates the mixed emotions generated by the Regional Network experience through examination of extended extracts from three principals' transcripts. Members of Regional Networks experienced a range of contradictory emotions. All the principals interviewed for this study were supportive of the collegiality and the governance arrangements of their Regional Network, which they considered to be fair and representative. They also appreciated having a Regional Network Leader (RNL) who was their conduit to the centre and kept them informed about the system's directions and expectations. Building the capacity of the workforce through quality professional learning opportunities was also seen to be a hallmark of the period and was valued by network members. At the same time there were aspects of the system and the Regional Network structure that did not sit well with principals.

Emotions revealed in these extended extracts show the tension that existed between principals' altruistic commitment to the centre's vision which was to improve students' outcomes, and their feelings of unease with regard to some of the centre's machinations in achieving that vision. While Chapters 6 and 7 present the themes that emerged from principals' transcripts under the headings of what helped and hindered principals in their work as members of Regional Networks, it would be a mistake to think that experiences could always be neatly classified into those categories. Therefore, the extracts included in this chapter illustrate the tensions related to negotiating the various central directives, differences between types of

schools within a network and the conflicted relationships that could arise from the merged cultures that were at the heart of the new structure.

These factors resulted in paradoxical emotions in which members could see and support the idealism of the vision while expressing frustrations related to their perceptions of the day-to-day network experience. The principals and the RNLs were all part of the system, but the centre directed things. Principals embraced the vision because they believed in the altruistic goal of improving the outcomes for all students and related strongly to the strategy of building the skills of the workforce through professional learning and the development of common approaches to align practice. There was a definite excitement generated by the system's investment in building the capacity of the workforce by way of resources and professional learning. However, contradictory emotions resulted when principals realised that aspects of the implementation affected them negatively or when there were aspects of the implementation that they did not agree with. Sometimes the central levers to gain alignment through a systems thinking approach affected individuals conversely. While in broad terms it can be said that all principals interviewed for this study valued the experience of being a member of a Regional Network, there were certainly aspects of the membership that produced mixed feelings. Extracts from the transcripts of Laura, Martin and Jennie have been selected to illustrate the complexity and range of experiences for principals as members of the structure. The analysis of these extracts is prefaced with a discussion of the theoretical context of functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Paulsen, 2016).

Functional stupidity occurs within organisations when there is an "absence of reflexivity" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012 p.1194). In organisations where there is a strong emphasis on vision, image and alignment, such as occurred over the years of

the reform agenda (DEECD 2007a) and which led to the introduction of Regional Networks, Alvesson and Spicer (2012) argue that forms of stupidity management repress questioning and obstruct communication. This can lead to both positive and negative effects for organisations. If individuals emphasise only positive narratives and set aside negative and ambiguous ones because of either the charisma of system leaders or a genuine investment by individuals in the vision, a lack of reflexivity and accountability can follow. When organisational leaders structure conversations closely around a vision and block alternate dialogue through the creation of tight agendas and restrictive groups, both negative or positive outcomes can be the result. Members of the organisation can feel safe and secure within a constrained vision and direction that requires unquestioning compliance. All the principals who participated in this study commented on the directed nature of the vision which was based on alignment. A strong and directed vision was seen as a positive thing because it united the organisation and introduced a common language. However feelings of disconnect can result if an individual cannot reconcile their own views with that of the restrictive culture of the organisation (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Paulsen, 2012).

The Regional Network structure was designed to produce system-wide improvement. However the structure was rigid, in spite of the promotion of collaborative practice. The expectations of the system leaders of the time were clear but directive; there was no compromise. Regional Networks were coordinated by the RNL who was a conduit for the centre and there were clear expectations of what the role should achieve. Regional Networks were structured in a way that limited questions that could undermine the central vision of system alignment because agendas were tight, and the membership was restricted and mandated. Within the context of functional stupidity, Regional Networks reinforced the centre's directions

and acted as an instrument that would contain principals while, at the same time, supporting their work. Alvesson and Spicer (2016, p. 1198) identified “irrational exuberance” that can result from unquestioning acceptance of an organisation’s rhetoric. In the case of the DEECD, the argument for alignment was presented as compelling and reinforced symbolically through the large investment in professional learning at the principal level.

Before looking more closely at the extended extracts, to refresh the reader’s understanding, a brief outline of the backgrounds of the three principals whose extracts are discussed in this chapter is given. Laura was the principal of a large primary school, in her second principalship. She had been a principal for 14 years when the Regional Network structure was introduced and had expressed some feelings of disillusionment due to the lack of affirmation of her skills by regional and central leaders. Martin was the principal of a large secondary school in a growth corridor on the outer-fringe of Melbourne. He had been a principal for five years when the Regional Networks were formed. Martin was one of the principals who were adversely affected by a restructure of his Regional Network after the first year and many difficulties ensued when he became disconnected from the positive relationships with local principals that had been formed only a year earlier. Jennie was the principal of a Specialist Development School. Because of the nature of her school’s setting she felt that she had little in common with the broad emphasis of the network’s directions, which catered mostly to mainstream schools and she was very critical of the system’s lack of understanding of her specialist school setting. In analysing the three extracts I also drew on my insider knowledge of the system as a former principal and Regional Network Leader to highlight the significance of the background to some of the points raised.

Extract from Laura's Transcript

I found it a tokenistic process [Instructional Rounds]. I think to go into a school and look at a problem of practice , which is a deficit model, into another school to observe teachers that we didn't know, and to look at what the teacher was saying, what the children were saying was tokenistic and frankly, embarrassing.

I think we could have looked at more of the development of peer coaching, development of the trust and relationships that we need to have in our own schools rather than to look at another school. And the role of the RNL at the time was to get you out and go into other schools and it was absolutely a tick the box thing because they were being pressured into doing that. I felt that was imposed on all of us. I know it was meant to be optional but there was a sense that you were pretty out on the edge if you didn't do it...I think that the conversation at the network level was focused on the important things around being in a network, focused around student outcomes. Not that we got all of these things right, a la the Instructional Rounds.

...The looking out, the inspiration for principals to look beyond their schools, to actually say we are in a network and there are other schools in the network doing great things and we have an opportunity to visit them, and find out what they are doing, was a very open period of time. However there were also schools that saw themselves as maybe above other schools and they had a bit of a buy-out of being involved.

...But knowing that the Regional Network Leader was going to be at the meeting every time was a reassuring point, if you wanted to talk, as a network, about something that was happening at the region you could do that, the person was physically there, that's not the case now. The Regional Director didn't come to every meeting so I think the Regional Network Leader was important in being able to take information straight back, and then get back to principals immediately. But there was a lot to get back to because we had a clear agenda. And I think the vacuum in educational leadership and the depletion of regional resources in the last few years, has led to I think, a much weaker sense of the network.

Laura's opening comments in this extract relate to her negative feelings about the network's project of classroom observations, *Instructional Rounds*. While Laura supported the vision of the system and the changed focus for networks away from collegiality to school improvement through professional learning, she could not connect to *Instructional Rounds* as a vehicle for achieving those goals. Laura's comment that, "*Not that we got all of these things right, a la the Instructional Rounds*", relates to her negative perception about this initiative that will also be referred to in a general way in Chapter 7 in *Theme 1d. Projects and initiatives that did not assist*. Laura felt uncomfortable about *Instructional Rounds* as she regarded this approach as an artificial exercise. She described it as "*embarrassing*" and "*tokenistic*". She did not see value into going into another school for a short time and criticising the teaching practice in that school after one observation. For Laura, a "*peer observation*" approach within her own school would have been a more constructive approach and she made very clear that she felt that the system had imposed this initiative onto networks that had little choice but to comply. Laura saw

it in the following terms, “*it absolutely was a tick the box thing because they were being pressured into doing that. I felt that was imposed on all of us*”. When Laura said “*they*” were under pressure to be doing Instructional Rounds, the suggestion was that both the RNL and the Executive were expected to embrace this program. There was a sense of anger in Laura’s comments as she spoke about the fact that she felt pressured into participating. That pressure came directly from the RNL and fellow principals. As *Instructional Rounds* was the priority of the network as a vehicle for examining Mathematics teaching, there was an expectation that everyone in the network would be involved. While it was said that participation was optional, Laura did not feel that there really was an option, “*it was meant to be optional but there was a sense that you were pretty out on the edge if you didn’t do it*”.

As a former RNL I know that *Instructional Rounds* were adopted with an almost religious fervour within many Regional Networks. RNLs were trained in this process by the system and there was an expectation that Regional Networks would implement *Instructional Rounds*. This was evident because Melvin, Robert, Sam, Laura and Melissa mention them as a project within their networks. However Melvin, Robert, Sam and Melissa regarded Instructional Rounds as a positive initiative.

The fact that Laura, a very experienced principal, was caught up in the expectation that all principals in the network would participate in the program and she felt that she had no option but to comply with the network’s expectations, shows the pressure to conform to expectations that came from both within the network and from the centre. Laura clearly did not see value in the process although many other principals did. However, she did not want to be seen as an outsider, “*on the edge*”. Paulsen (2016 p. 3) attributes such “unreflective compliance” by principals across a

network to functional stupidity. Paulsen argues that such compliance can lead to cynicism and despair and Laura's view of the program was certainly cynical as shown by her comment "*a la the Instructional Rounds*". To put Laura's reluctance to air her concerns in context, Laura's feelings are also discussed in Chapter 7 when looking at theme 2e. *Lack of recognition and affirmation*, and 4e. *Nepotism and favouritism*. In examining these themes, Laura's comments dwell on the fact that she had felt overlooked by the system because she had been vocal in the past. In her view she had paid the price for being "*seen to be too mouthy*", which is a comment she made in another section of her transcript.

However, in contrast to this view, Laura also spoke positively about her memories related to the distinctive nature of collaboration and collegiality within the Regional Network structure, especially her visits to other schools. After Laura's negative comments about *Instructional Rounds*, she distinguishes positively between the focus of the Regional Network as opposed to the structure that had existed previously. The agenda "*was focused on the important things around being in a network, focused around student outcomes*". Laura valued this change in direction and was very supportive of the system's vision. It is interesting that although Laura highlighted this time as a "*very open*" period, she acknowledged that she discerned a range of attitudes from some principals that set them apart as patronising, "*there were also schools that saw themselves as maybe above other schools and they had a bit of a buy-out of being involved*". Laura's network contained some very high-achieving schools; this determination was based on results in NAPLAN and the final year of schooling, the VCE. Laura's sense that these schools considered themselves "*above other schools*" suggests that there was an undercurrent of tension within the membership of the network.

Laura found interactions with the RNL “*reassuring*” and found the “*clear agenda*”, in communicating information from the centre, very important. When Laura no longer had a direct link with the Education Department through the RNL, she saw this as a loss. From her perspective the move away from Regional networks resulted in “*a much weaker sense of the network*”. The strength of that period for Laura was epitomised in the comment, “*looking out, the inspiration for principals to look beyond their schools*”. Therefore, for Laura, the Regional Network experience was bittersweet. Laura’s comments show that she did have the ability to be reflexive about the activities of the network but in spite of her saying that the period was “*very open*”, she did not articulate her concerns about *Instructional Rounds* because the system demanded compliance.

In this case functional stupidity was managed by RNLs and the system by restricting agendas and limiting discussion. As an RNL I attended a week’s training in *Instructional Rounds* delivered by Richard Elmore with all the RNLs from across the state. Elmore had been engaged by the system to ensure this program became a priority across Regional Networks and we were expected to implement it in our own networks. I remember at the conclusion of the training, there was a Pledge to Action as Elmore whipped up the audience to pledge allegiance to the delivery of the program. I thought at the time that there was an atmosphere of evangelical enthusiasm that was unquestioned and frightening. Functional stupidity was demonstrated in the well-managed narrative that we all accepted on that day. For Laura, there were certainly contradictions in her feelings regarding the Regional Network structure which she managed by keeping those ideas to herself. For her, the over-riding positive influence was the strong educational leadership that epitomised that period. Therefore because Laura was committed to her work with students she

rationalised the contradictions (Paulsen, 2012) in the bigger picture view. The period that followed that Laura described as “*the vacuum in educational leadership and the depletion of regional resources in the last few years*”, in Laura’s view had resulted in a “weaker” network.

Extract from Martin’s Transcript

Personally, I didn’t relate to it [compulsory educational readings supplied by the Department of Education]. How do I say this? At the time, 2008, 2009, 2010, our school was pulling itself up by the boot straps from being an under-performing school, and we developed our own strategies for school improvement and we were working intensively with a leadership coach and really rebuilding things inside the school all over again, so we had our own Blueprint for rebuilding our schools. And the first focus at that time was to establish an orderly learning environment, get some consistency in that regard and then we started moving into the learning areas in a big way. And we had our own plan and open learning was not the way we were going. It wasn’t a high priority for us but it was for the region. So all that discussion was not really for us. What we were on about was explicit instruction, and heading towards clear learning intentions and success criteria and that approach. By all means, we were for collaboration of teachers but not together in the classrooms. Small teams of teachers, such as the Year 8 teachers, would meet together on a weekly basis and look at the data of the students, plan, discuss the teaching strategies that would be appropriate for those students.

...Well, it's just that there seemed to be an over-riding focus from the region on open learning in this area during those years. So that was fine for other schools but it was not for us. I thought that's fine for you guys but it wasn't for us. Because sometimes principals have to protect their schools, so they can get on with the work of improvement.

At the beginning of this extract Martin referred to the principal readings that were provided to Regional Network principals. As previously outlined, books were given to principals each year and there was an expectation that they would be read and discussed through book clubs within the Regional Network structure. This formed part of the professional learning expectations within each network. However, Martin's focus was at the practical level of school improvement within his own context. He knew what needed to happen at the school level for his context and he did not see value in the emphasis on principal readings, "*I didn't relate to it*". As a former RNL I know that central leaders expected there to be a huge emphasis by RNLs on principal readings through book discussions within network meetings and the distribution of chapter summaries to principals. Spot quizzes on principal readings were part of *Big Days Out*, the centrally organised principals' forums, and those who answered correctly received significant prizes such as an iPad or camera. From Paulsen's perspective (2016, p.16) one way that functional stupidity is rationalised by organisational members is by getting on with the job, "Do your work". Martin said, "*we had our own plan*" and that was where he directed his energy. Martin navigated through his conflicted views about the system's methods of generating school improvement by concentrating on his own school. Martin was very clear about the priorities he needed to protect. "*What we were on about was explicit*

instruction, and heading towards clear learning intentions and success criteria and that approach”.

Martin's comments showed the complete disconnect between some of the expectations imposed on principals within the networks and the reality of the day-to-day struggles of school improvement implementation. Martin was very supportive of the initial membership of his Regional Network but re-structure that separated him from his collegial group resulted in his total disillusionment. Within Chapter 6, an analysis of Martin's comments reveals strong support for the vision of alignment in spite of its prescriptive nature, however, with regard to some aspects of the reform vision such as the principal readings commented upon in this extract, Martin took a more practical approach because the imposed initiative had little relevance to his setting.

Martin was very clear about the improvement focus for his school and, although it was based on collaboration, it was at odds with the region's approach, *“we had our own plan and open learning was not the way we were going. It wasn't a high priority for us but it was for the region”*. From my own experience as a Regional Network Leader, I was aware of the regional push towards open learning spaces in Southern Metropolitan Region that RNLs were expected to oversee. Schools were required to develop a pedagogical plan based on the use of flexible learning spaces to align with the rollout of new open-plan buildings across the district. This focus was related to preparation for the Building the Education Revolution (BER), a national building program that related to all schools in Australia receiving funding for new classrooms or a school hall. Although this trend was a strong push from the regional office that had set up a team of coaches to work with schools through their Regional Networks, this initiative was not Martin's priority. In

fact his school did not adopt the same positive stance about open learning spaces, *“there seemed to be an over-riding focus from the region on open learning in this area during those years. So that was fine for other schools but it was not for us. I thought that’s fine for you guys but it wasn’t for us.”* Martin’s term for regional leaders as *“you guys”* expresses his separation from them. Martin felt very strongly that this direction was not appropriate for his school and he was very clear about the need to *“protect”* his school from regional interference when he repeated, *“I thought that’s fine for you guys but it wasn’t for us. Because sometimes principals have to protect their schools, so they can get on with the work of improvement.”*

Martin comments confirmed that his first loyalty was to his own school. He understood that the system could impose directions and approaches to achieve their goals. Martin did not disagree with the open learning goal and he continued to pursue his own understanding of school improvement that was not at odds with the regional office’s picture. Martin wanted to *“get on with the work of improvement”* and felt confident and independent enough in his role to do that his way. In this sense he did not trust the system and felt that he needed to *“protect his school”*. From the perspective of functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012) Martin did demonstrate reflexivity in questioning the system’s direction. His undermining of functional stupidity through his refusal to adopt a strategy that was not right for his school, reflected Martin’s confidence in his autonomy as a principal. Alvesson and Spicer (2012 p.1200) maintain that *“Anxiety at work and personal insecurity may reinforce functional stupidity”*. This was not the case for Martin who was empowered to act. His faith in the vision and goals of the organisation remained strong but he did not agree with the approaches that were being imposed on his school.

When discussing the *Theme 4d. Arbitrary nature of decision-making* in Chapter 7, it will be shown that Martin was very outspoken about the way decisions such as the re-structure of his Regional Network were made, without consideration for the impacts on individual schools. Within that context he reacted equally arbitrarily in refusing to join in with the re-structured network's activities because it did not work for him or his school. So from that perspective Martin did not see a robust justification by the regional leaders for the decision which led to feelings of "dissonance" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012 p. 1220). The regional office's blanket approach to open learning was another example of what Martin regarded as their cavalier attitude to decision-making, resulting in his refusal to adopt this approach. Martin stood firm to his own school's directions and displayed confidence in his own autonomy as principal. He was courageous in his determination to protect his school against regional interference for which the Regional Networks and its leaders became the vehicle.

The paradox for Martin lay in the disconnection between his commitment to the system's goal of school improvement and the system's expectations of alignment. By suppressing such ambiguities, handling them by quietly ignoring them as Martin did because he saw no vehicle for challenging decisions, functional stupidity within the system was reinforced. In organisations where there is a major focus on culture and vision, there can be a "symbolic manipulation" of workers when there is a lack of opportunity challenge and question at an organisational level (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), reducing opportunities for reflexivity.

Extract from Jennie's Transcript

... we were involved in the Republic of Korea program (ROK) and when we went into town involved in the exchange and there is a big sign up in town about it mentioning primary and secondary schools in the ROK program and no special schools, and I thought, here we go again, we are the ones involved in it and there were not a lot of schools involved and no mention. It's probably symbolic and it makes you feel that you are not acknowledged.

RESEARCHER: *...is there anything in summing up you would want to say about that structure?*

JENNIE: {Long silence}. *I think there was good and bad. I didn't feel the work here, in this school as an SDS, was valued in the same way as the work in other schools. That sort of mentality. And there were very strong opinions and strong voices and I sometimes felt that some people wouldn't value my opinion because I wasn't doing, in their eyes, the work they were doing but I am and I was, just at a different level. So I didn't get a great deal of support, No. But I think that's because I'm from an SDS. And there is nothing really out there by way of resources for us.*

But as far as leadership knowledge, theories of action and so on, they were helpful...I think it was the personality of the previous leader that made the difference. I think that person really understood the SDS setting. I just think that the support from Regional Network Leaders and the system was not the same for special schools but that's not the case for all of my colleagues in special settings [pause] some felt that they had great support from their Regional Network Leader because they had a deeper

understanding of the work we do, and if you don't have a deep understanding of the work we do; it's a little different.

Jennie's extract revealed two examples of the lack of acknowledgement by the system of her specialist school setting within relatively a few minutes of the interview. In the first example Jennie described her involvement in a Korean language exchange program. This was a significant and challenging commitment for her specialist development setting and yet, from a systemic point of view, there was no acknowledgement of her school within the welcome signs that were displayed, in spite of the fact that other schools involved that were mainstream settings were acknowledged. While Jennie saw that the welcome sign would be only be a "symbolic" acknowledgement of her school's involvement, the absence of that affirmation had a negative impact on her because it reinforced her feelings of marginalisation. Lack of recognition was an experience that was constantly reinforced in Jennie's dealings with both the centre and the Regional Network. In giving the example of her school's involvement in a Korean language exchange program, Jennie spoke bitterly about the absence of recognition of her school's participation within this program, although the other schools that participated were acknowledged. The most disappointing part about Jennie's comments was her sense of resignation, "*I thought here we go again*". Paulsen (2012) identifies Jennie's attitude as one of the reflective modes of compliance that are manifest in attitudes of both cynicism and an acceptance "It's the way it is" (Paulsen, 2012 p.17). Such feelings of resignation that nothing had changed in recognising her school's contribution to the system also extended to Jennie's involvement in the Regional Network.

The second example related to when the researcher asked Jennie if there was anything she wanted to add to her comments about being a member of a Regional Network. There was a long pause before she finally replied, *“I think there was good and bad”*. Jennie looked for the positive aspects she could take from the Regional Network experience and she certainly made a contribution through her membership of the Executive but Jennie explained that she did not feel valued or treated equally by network members because a specialist developmental school operated on a different level. Schools like Jennie’s do not use mainstream data sets to measure student progress and Jennie felt little support for her school’s needs, especially when the Regional Network’s emphasis on school improvement was largely based on national testing data that was irrelevant to her setting. Jennie was very clear about her feelings of being on the fringe of the network. In her mind other principals and the RNL did not really understand her work or appreciate it. *“I didn’t feel the work here, in this school as an SDS, was valued in the same way as the work in other schools”*. Jennie did not clarify any further how she knew that other principals felt that way but she did comment in other parts of her interview that the strategic plan did not relate to her setting and that other initiatives within the network were not relevant to her school. Therefore she struggled to find relevance in her membership of the network.

Jennie felt that the strong personalities of some principals in the network had a dominating effect on the network’s operations, engendering a narrow view of the contribution that an alternative setting could make to the network. Jennie said that *“there were very strong opinions and strong voices and I sometimes felt that some people wouldn’t value my opinion because I wasn’t doing, in their eyes, the work they were doing but I am and I was, just at a different level”*. It is hard to say

whether Jennie would have felt more confident had she had a few more years' experience as a principal behind her when the Regional Networks were introduced as she had only been a principal for three years at that stage. Jennie struggled to find a comfortable place within the Regional Network structure even though she understood that her work was of equal importance to any other principal. She was, nevertheless, determined to be active in the network in spite of her feelings of marginalisation and played a significant role as a member of the Executive. However, in looking for "*good*" things to say about the structure Jennie did acknowledge that the broad discussions about school leadership were helpful, "*as far as leadership knowledge, theories of action and so on, they were helpful*" but in spite of attempts to connect with the network and take on additional responsibility through membership of the Executive (detailed in Chapters 6 and 7), she remained an outsider. Jennie was resigned to the fact that she "*didn't get a great deal of support, No. But I think that's because I'm from an SDS*". She was accepting of the fact that she was perceived to be different from other principals because she was not the principal of a mainstream setting.

Jennie commented on the quality of her RNL and the fact that there was no real understanding of her setting. "I think it was the personality of the previous leader that made the difference. I think that person really understood the SDS setting". Had there been greater understanding of her setting from the RNL, Jennie may have felt more connected to the Regional Network. She missed the "deep understanding" of her school that she wanted from the RNL and had previously experienced in the former collaborative arrangement. Although the focus of that previous arrangement had not been the same directed focus on student learning, for Jennie that previous arrangement was more supportive because of the individual

leader involved. Sam, Laura and Martin also commented that the quality of the RNL made a difference to their perceptions of the network. These comments are expanded upon in Chapter 6 *Theme 1a. The RNL role*. However returning to Jennie's perceptions, she was careful to be fair in her comments, clarifying that this was her particular experience and "that's not the case for all of my colleagues in special settings [pause] some felt that they had great support from their Regional Network Leader".

In my former role as Regional Network Leader, I recognised the isolation of special school principals in the network and recalled that when our network meetings clashed with meetings of the special school network (which was quite often) principals of special settings always chose to attend those meetings ahead of the Regional Network meetings. In setting dates for meetings I don't remember that there was any attempt made to coordinate the occurrence of these meetings so that they would not clash. This was simply not factored in, yet from a regional perspective there was an expectation that all principals attended the Regional Network meetings and principals' performance plans contained a criterion related to their contribution to the Regional Network. I did not receive any training as a Regional Network Leader related to special settings even though most RNLs were not drawn from that background. It was a struggle to properly address the needs of these schools, when as RNLs we were also learning on the run. Nevertheless, there was an assumption by the system that we would understand the complexities of these settings and be able to support these principals to the same degree that we could support principals from mainstream settings. This proved to be more difficult in practice as evidenced by Jennie's comments.

By considering the extended extracts of Laura, Martin and Jennie which reveal contradictory feelings about the experience of being a member of a Regional Network and that are discussed through the frame of functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Paulson, 2012), another perspective of the Regional Network experience is shown. Through this frame aspects of the system's strong focus on leadership, identity, culture and learning through Regional Networks can be seen to be a controlling influence on principals. This led to the mixed emotions of commitment, compliance, cynicism and withdrawal that are so strongly expressed by Martin, Jennie and Laura. While each principal expressed disappointment and disillusionment, there was still a strong sense of connection to the system and commitment to the students in their care. These extracts add another perspective to the complexity of feelings that were experienced by principals as members of a system-driven network.

The chapters which follow, further develop the picture of what it was like to be a member of a Regional Network. Chapter 6 presents a thematic analysis of what helped principals in their work and, in contrast, Chapter 7 discusses themes that focus on what hindered principals in their work. Therefore the process of the analysis of principals' perceptions moves through a distinct process of three parts. The first stage in the process was the reconstruction of principals' stories to reveal an essential understanding of each experience as unique. The second stage in the process provided an extended analysis of three extracts that demonstrate mixed feelings about the Regional Networks, which is contained within this chapter. Thirdly, a thematic analysis of transcripts is presented in Chapters 6 and 7. Themes in Chapter 6 are categorised under the headings of aspects of the Regional Network experience

that helped principals. Chapter 7 presents a discussion of themes that were seen to hinder principals in their work.

Chapter 6. How the Networks Helped Principals

Themes are the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through. (van Manen, 1990, p. 90)

Introduction

The process for thematic analysis, which followed the reconstruction of lived experiences presented in the previous chapter, is outlined in the introduction to this chapter and applies both to this chapter which covers themes about what helped principals as members of Regional Networks and the subsequent chapter, which examines aspects of Regional Network membership that hindered principals in their role. In the following paragraphs the initial process for identifying and classifying themes under the four broad headings of *Regional Network Operations*; *Relationships*; *Professional Learning*; and *The system* is presented.

After scrutinising the participants' transcripts at the paragraph, sentence and word level, an initial list of 24 themes was compiled. Extracts from transcripts for each participant were then tabulated according to responses to common ideas, for the purpose of facilitating comparisons at a later stage. See the appendix for more detail on this process. The initial theme list follows:

1. Collegiality and Relationships
2. The Regional Network Leader
3. Purpose of the Regional Network structure
4. System accountability
5. Systems Thinking, alignment and direction from the centre
6. Feelings of excitement about that time of educational reform
7. Professional learning and knowledge creation

8. Support, recognition and affirmation
9. Issues to do with mandated network membership
10. Network projects and initiatives
11. Network Executive and network governance
12. Principal autonomy
13. Impacts of policy changes
14. Arbitrary nature of decision-making
15. Self-forming networks
16. Excesses of the system
17. Favouritism or nepotism
18. Sense of abandonment and alienation
19. New sense of hope with new policy directions (Education State 2015)
20. Scepticism about new policy directions (Education State 2015)
21. Accurately remembering the Regional Network structure
22. Competition between network schools
23. Other influences on school improvement at the time (e.g. Federal funding)
24. Opportunities arising from the change to Regional Networks

On further perusal of the 24 themes identified, some themes were combined because of large natural overlap, while others were set aside because they did not reflect the lived experiences at the time. The outlying themes that were set aside are: *New sense of hope with new policy directions (Education State 2015)*; and *Scepticism about new policy directions (Education State 2015)*. The theme, *Accurately remembering the network structure* is covered in the methodology chapter, regarding the role of memory and its relationship to a phenomenological

study. Although this theme was identified in 7/10 transcripts it was only casually mentioned, by way of seeking clarification of the topic under discussion that is the type of network structure we were identifying as Regional Networks had ended three in 2012.

In Chapter 5 prior to outlining the participants' stories that were reconstructed as part of the process of phenomenological analysis, the following terms were explained: *Big Days Out*; *Ultramet* and *Ultramet Bus*; *Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission* (IBAC); *Summer Institutes at Harvard*; and *Instructional Rounds*. An understanding of these terms is also necessary when reading the next two chapters as this terminology emerged across several themes when participants spoke about their experiences of Regional Networks.

It is not possible to consider the experience of being a member of a Regional Network independently of comments made about the system, of which it is a subset. Regional Networks, as an instrument of the system, played a key role in the reform agenda. Keeping this in mind, the next step in analysing themes was to classify them under broader headings. As previously mentioned, these are *Regional Network Operations*; *Relationships*; *Learning*; and, *The system*. These headings were determined because they clearly encompassed the series of themes that were classified within each category. Themes included on the initial list as *System accountability* and *Principal autonomy* have been combined and addressed under the broader category of *The system*. The initially identified theme of *Competition between network schools* has been absorbed under the broader category of *Regional Networks*, under comments about projects and governance.

After classification of the themes under the four headings of *Regional Network Operations*; *Relationships*; *Learning*; and *The system* was completed the

themes were then separated out into those themes that helped principals in their role and those themes that hindered them. The following table shows the themes that were identified. These are listed under the headings of *What helped principals?* and *What hindered principals?*

Table 2

Themes About What Helped and Hindered Principals

What helped principals?			
1. Regional Network Operations	2. Relationships	3. Learning	4. The system
1a. The RNL role	2a. Collegiality	3a. Connection with Professional learning	4a. Systems Thinking and alignment
1b. Network Executive and Governance	2b. Self-forming networks	3b. Opportunities arising from the change to Regional Networks	4b. Excitement about the time
1c. Projects and initiatives that assisted	2c. Recognition and affirmation.	3c. Engagement with system documents	
What hindered principals?			
1. Regional Network Operations	2. Relationships	3. Learning	4. The system
1d. Projects and initiatives that did not assist.	2d. Sense of abandonment and alienation	3c. Disconnect with professional learning	4c. Impacts of policy change
1e. Mandated membership	2e. Lack of recognition and affirmation	3d. Lack of engagement with system documents	4d. Arbitrary nature of decision making
			4e. Nepotism and favouritism
			4f. Excesses of the system

This chapter is devoted to the discussion of themes that helped principals in their work. The following chapter addresses the themes under the category of hindrances.

After the discussion of the thematic analysis is completed in relation to what helped or hindered principals, towards the end of Chapter 7 the additional lens of three theoretical frameworks is applied across the broad headings of Regional Network Operations; Relationships; Learning; and The System. These frameworks identified in the literature review as being integral to an understanding of Education Networks are included to anchor the discussion of themes within a strong context of educational reform ideology and purpose. These theoretical frameworks are System Thinking (Senge, 2006); Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012); and Governance (Moore & Khagram; 2004).

The themes that were found to be supportive of the principal role are set out in the following table and a detailed discussion of those themes follows. The theme of *Mandated membership* was not included here but was included in Table 2 as it was not considered to be a theme that could be categorised as helping principals based on the comments of the participants.

Table 3

Themes About What Helped Principals

1. Regional Network Operations	2. Relationships	3. Learning	4. The system
1a. The RNL role	2a. Collegiality	3a. Connection with professional learning	4a. Systems Thinking and alignment
1b. Network Executive and Governance	2b. Self-forming networks	3b. Opportunities arising from the change to Regional Networks	4b. Excitement about the time
1c. Projects and initiatives	2c. Recognition and affirmation.	3c. Engagement with system documents	

Theme 1. Regional Network Operations

Within the classification of themes about Regional Network Operations four sub-themes emerged. These are: The Regional Network Leader (RNL) role; Purpose of Regional Network Structure; Network Executive, governance and projects; and Mandated membership. The RNL Role; and the Purpose of Regional Network, are discussed together under Theme 1a. The RNL role, as comments that are related to these ideas are inter-twined. The remaining themes in this section are discussed individually, using extracts from transcripts from within each subset. Spaces between extracts from transcripts indicate that these extracts are drawn from different sections of the transcript and that the text included is not continuous.

1a. The RNL role. All the principals expressed a clear view of the purpose and context for the RNL role as a vehicle to drive the school improvement agenda. They saw value in the RNL role because it connected them to the system more directly and they appreciated having a supportive intermediary who could advise them about issues that affected their schools and their roles.

The difference they make is the way they support and provide information to help us work our way through things, so that we can then make decisions. Our first RNL was very good at that; he brought a lot of energy and information to us from the region and it helped us as a network to make appropriate decisions. (Sam)

Principals saw an advantage in the size of the Regional Network structure that allowed more direct contact with their line manager. However, that connection and support was perceived to be more valuable to less-experienced principals such as Belinda, who was particularly positive about the role.

Our Regional Network Leader was fantastic. I never felt imposed on by that role, and I know some people felt that the Department was driving their agenda through the Regional Network Leader. I personally never felt that.
(Belinda)

What becomes clear through the extracts is that all the principals regarded the role to be that of a facilitator and conduit for the system. They clearly understood that an important part of that role was directed towards generating understanding and compliance of government policies. *“My experience was that when the Regional Network Leaders drove the agenda we focused a lot more on specific things such as curriculum”* (Eliza).

Even though the role was determined to be a leadership one by the centre it was not necessarily perceived so. It depended very much on the quality of the individual Regional Network Leader, as to how their effectiveness was perceived by network members. Laura's comments expressed strongly her view that the RNLs were facilitators and conduits. While she appreciated the support and access to her RNL, she did not regard the role as a leadership one.

I'm not sure that there was a lot of leadership in that role. In fact, really I have very rarely seen in that period the role of the network leader as a leader; that's the ones I've had. I've only seen their role as managers or deliverers of information from the government and the priorities of the day.
(Laura)

In cases where networks were re-organised mid-stream, the comparison between the quality of leadership within those roles was clearly distinguished, as voiced by Martin and Sam.

We didn't, actually, have strong network leader leaders, the two of them that we had...The Regional Network Leaders that we had, did what they did, they followed the direction of the centre and the Regional Director. (Martin)

It makes a difference who the leader is, a huge difference. I think it's a critical role that the Regional Network leader plays in that, in connecting us to the region. (Sam)

Although principals regarded the Regional Network Leader role as a coordinator and facilitator of information rather than leader, the importance of facilitating connection and the building of relationships with the principals in the network was perceived to be an important part of that role if the Regional Network was to operate most effectively. Levin (2012) when accounting for the success of the school improvement agenda in Ontario emphasised the importance of building strong and close connections with principals in a local district. The role of a network facilitator, as a connector in drawing together all the actors in a network, is recognised as essential to progressing common goals in networks (Church et al., 2002).

1b. Network Executive and governance. On reviewing the comments of principals regarding their experience of the Executive committee and governance structure of the Regional Network, it appears that they accepted the structure as fair and representative of their interests because of the rotational nature and accessibility of its membership structure.

What the network did, was say: Look we're going to have tenure on the Executive, so we want to have as many principals involved in the Executive as possible, and have a rotation, so there would be one leader and an

executive supporting them and they would have a year or two as leader and then go back on the Executive and then go out. People would filter in and someone would step up. (Martin)

It was regarded as a fair way of representation. (Melissa)

It was not difficult to access membership on the Executive if one wanted it and there were also other opportunities to contribute and lead groups within the network, if that was what one preferred to do. Eight of the 10 principals interviewed served on the Executive at some stage.

They were encouraging people to join the Executive, it was open to all, but I didn't really want that extra responsibility with my school workload of 60-70 hours a week at that time. (Paul)

Martin and Paul chose not to be involved at the Executive level because they felt that the priorities and workload at their own schools did not afford them the time for this level of involvement. However, Paul spoke about his preferred role as a conference coordinator, “*I was quite happy to do one thing to assist so that is why I offered to coordinate the conference*”. Robert recalled that he had been on the Executive for a time but then went on to lead another portfolio group; the Teaching and Learning group.

I always did play a role. I was never nominated, I was always invited. Initially we were asked to go on that first executive and after that, it was a bit like school council with a rotation of primary secondary and special school members and gender balance in there. The Chair didn't change very often, a couple of times, but I was glad I wasn't the Chair because that was a lot of

extra work. I was quite happy just to run the Teaching and Learning group.

(Robert)

Principals were respectful of the work that the Executive was involved in and endorsed it with their support. While they understood that the structure was driven from the centre they regarded the working relationship with the Regional Network Leader, who brought the centre's policy perspective, as a necessary partnership. Melvin explained that he saw the specific parameters of both the Regional Network Leader's role and that of the principal members of the Executive as distinct but harmonious.

The network leader had a certain set of parameters and frameworks in which they had to do things and the Executive had some of those but it also had its own imperatives. You know, the long-standing one of collegiality between the principals, while that might not be on anybody's formal agenda. (Melvin)

Laura spoke about the role the Executive played in generating system alignment by spreading the school improvement vision by the centre. This was largely driven through the Regional Network Leader.

I think the Executive has always been very important. It's really important for a small group of people to go away, take on board the views that are expressed at a network meeting and unpack it. So, yes, I think the Executive played a very important part, we were all on the same page because there was a vision. (Laura)

The Executive played an active role in unpacking and clarifying expectations and directives from the centre. The principals respected their peers who were on the Executive, in the knowledge that they were advocates for them and their schools.

Robert says, "*There were lots of good members who were interested in making things work*".

It seems that Regional Networks Leaders were able to modify the structure of the Regional Network Executive outlined in the accountability guidelines (DEECD, 2010). Melissa speaks about how the structure of the Executive was changed by her Regional Network Leader to include a greater representation of the network's members.

The direction from the centre later came for the new networks and that the steering committee should be the Regional Network Leader and two others. But our Regional Network Leader decided that Primary Secondary and Special Education should be represented on the committee and because we had more primary schools, two primaries should be on the committee. A steering committee of four. (Melissa)

However, Martin recalled that when he was required to change to another network the rotational aspect of that executive's membership was not as transparent. He said, "*In the new network I went to, there wasn't that level of movement*". This highlights the point made by principals in theme 1a. *The Regional Network Leader Role*, when they indicated that the qualities and skills of Regional Network Leaders varied from network to network. Some experiences were more positive than others. Jennie's perception of her network's executive (of which she was a member) was that the Regional Network Leader definitely took a directive approach. "*I think there was some ability for the Executive to drive it but the Regional Network Leader definitely led the network directions.*" (Jennie)

Martin agreed that this was also true in his situation, but he saw the network leader role as bringing a clarity and openness about the centre's expectations of principals.

There was that openness, and there was good input from the Executive but I think there was more, clear direction coming from the centre and I think that's important and the Executive and the Regional Network Leader worked together. (Martin)

Sam's view of the directed nature of the Regional Network Leader's interactions with the Executive was that it was purposeful and, essentially, supportive. He responded to the researcher's question about the Regional Network Leader's role on the Executive as follows, *"To support what we were doing and to bring in the perspectives from region and the Department, which I think is an essential role to have."*

Church et al. (2003) recommend having a management representative committee within the network structure such as the Executive committee in Regional Networks. However, the structure needs to evolve with the network, as the connections foster trust and relationships mature. Having some agreed protocols add clarity and direction, but the structure should not be too tight or it will constrain shared decision-making. The risk with system-generated groups is that central intervention can undermine autonomy while a bottom up structure fosters interactions between actors. (Bang & Sorensen, 1999)

1c. Network projects and initiatives that assisted. The principals involved in this study found value in the collaboration and knowledge sharing that occurred within the Regional Network structure. They were all able to speak of involvement in working parties and the professional satisfaction they gained from such a

connection. Belinda and Martin, both secondary principals, valued the increased levels of collaboration that the network provided. They were able to join groups that specifically addressed secondary school issues and this also improved their curriculum knowledge.

We had various working groups working on things, and you signed up for the working group that was most relevant for you at the time. So I signed up for a secondary literacy group that focused on improving literacy in secondary schools and from that small group of people conversations started happening about applying for Teacher Professional Leave as a network. (Belinda)

The best part of it was that we created a network secondary principals group and we met regularly and we met at each other's schools. So, there was a higher level of collaboration going with the secondary principals than I have ever been associated with in education. We were sharing ideas, best practice, we were looking for the areas of collaboration. (Martin)

Chapman and Hadfield (2010) identify agency and purpose as a feature of professional networks. Belinda and Martin experienced a newly found level of agency and purpose through their collaboration on network projects.

Eliza recalled the Literacy best-practice DVD that was created by network literacy teachers. The DVD was short-listed for an Excellence Award. Eliza explained how that came about, *"We set up a project to have a look at schools that had really improved their data within our network"*. Melissa felt that the sharing of data in her network led to a whole-of-network Numeracy focus, which affected improvements in her own school's approach to Numeracy teaching. *"We looked at how mathematics curriculum was structured in those schools that had high*

performance.” Paul was involved in a working party that organised a conference in New Zealand, which involved a number of school visits.

Some of us, including myself, organised a trip to Perth and a trip to New Zealand, and we invited our colleagues from other neighbouring networks and it was a great way to get to know each other. (Paul)

Several networks adopted the Instructional Rounds approach of classroom observations. Melissa, Robert, Melvin and Sam found this initiative of great value and brought them closer to the classroom. They believed this improved their practice as educational leaders. Melissa explained that, *“this gave us the direction of what to look for in classrooms because the focus was on what the teacher is doing and what the students are doing, and we would give feedback.”* Robert, in fact, led the Instructional Rounds team within his network, as did Melvin within his network.

Instructional Rounds went over about a six-month period. Five of us would observe in a classroom as a team for part of the lesson and then all the teams would meet up in a team room to discuss what we had seen and analyse what we had observed. That sort of thing still exists in this school, as a result of that. (Robert)

I had a core group of about six schools, who had a real interest and desire and commitment to seeing if we could build our own set of Instructional Rounds for leadership skills. So there were about 6 and I’m not looking to build an empire, and of the 6, we would have had about 4 rounds a year, and one a term in different schools. (Melvin)

Theme 2. Relationships

Relationships and connection are integral to the purpose of networks (Church et al., 2002; Hargreaves, 2003; Inkpen & Tsang, 2005) and were a key motivating factor in principals supporting the Regional Network structure. The themes included under this category all relate to the importance of connectedness as a supporting influence. The theme *2b. Self-forming networks* is included under this category because the driving motivation for joining such groups was to build connection with like-minded principals. Like-mindedness could be driven by commonality of school type or the specific curriculum priorities. In this way self-forming networks satisfied the need for professional relationships that may not have been satisfied by the breadth of membership within the Regional Network structure.

2a. Collegiality. All the principals valued relationships and collegiality as an essential component of the Regional Network structure. However, collegiality was not seen to have been confined to this new structure; it had also existed as an integral part of previous collaborative groups. In fact, part of the angst related to the *Mandated membership* theme, which is covered in the next chapter, was that the new structure disrupted existing relationships. Eliza commented that because of the tight agenda in the Regional Network structure there was less time for collegiality. However, she found the satisfaction of working together on joint projects with member principals helped to consolidate new relationships. Eliza always valued collegiality and greatly valued being part of a focused team. *"Maybe there was a little less time for collegiality in that we had our working parties and we were working on our values; we had really tight agendas."* Jennie, the principal of the Specialist Development School, who commented that much of the network's business was related to mainstream schools, still valued the collegiality within the

Regional Network. She saw collegiality as the most positive thing that she got out of the Regional Network.

Absolutely. I feel very strongly, I don't want to be that principal who is in the SDS (Specialist Development School), who doesn't want to come to the meetings and who disconnect from things, so I found the collegiality very helpful. (Jennie)

Laura, who has been a principal for 21 years, spoke about the collegiate value and trust that was generated within the Regional Network. *"I loved seeing colleagues. I loved the round table discussion which was vibrant people could talk openly, definitely about what was going on in their school."*

The network was a vehicle for connecting and sharing. Laura really valued it when another principal called her and asked for her advice, and she was reassured by the fact that this was reciprocated. She spoke about the strength of the network lying in the relationships and she summed this up by saying, *"We all **got** each other"*, meaning that they all understood each other. Martin reminisced about the relationships he shared as a member of his first Regional Network, and the lack of connection that he experienced in the second Regional Network.

Well, you know, there's a lot to gain from co-operation as opposed to competition. Enrolments can be one of the tension points in the relationship among secondary schools, between one secondary school and its neighbouring secondary schools. The best way to do that is to have a trusting relationship between the principals and have some guidelines about how we do Enrolment, the benefits through the collaboration and trusting relationship far outweighed what you might get by picking up a terrific student from outside your area. So that was a real positive. (Martin)

The fact that that connection was missing in the second instance led to disillusionment and withdrawal from attending the network meetings. These feelings are discussed in Chapter 7, *Theme 2d. Sense of abandonment and alienation*. The bond formed between secondary principals during Martin's membership of the first Regional Network was strong. Martin described it as, "*really fantastic*", for this reason. The positive relationships led to a stronger understanding of each other's schools and a collaborative team approach to district-wide issues. "*By collaboration, you're thinking about what's good for you and me, not just me, it's all about us, together*". Melissa, who was the Network Chair, spoke about the importance of fostering relationships through social contexts in the early days of the Regional Network, as the two merged groups got to know each other. It was important to build the new network on the foundations of collegiality. "*So we did a lot of activities to develop collegiality, getting to know you. We had a Melbourne Cup theme because it was around November when it started*". (Melissa)

Melvin also stressed the importance of building relationships and endorsed the new structure as being conducive to relational trust because of its size. "*When there was one network leader with 25 schools, there was a chance; that 1 to 25 relationship could build relational trust*".

When considering the importance of relationships and collegiality as a vehicle for building the capacity of network members, Robert spoke about the way their Regional Network Leader actively built connections with principals by visiting their schools and knowing about them. But he also spoke about the role of the Chair as being a key person in fostering collegiality and inclusion.

I've got great respect for that Chair who knows how to make people feel welcomed and included. She is a very good operator. I was on the Executive committee at that time. (Robert)

The Regional Network Leader was the first point of contact for principals if there was an issue so a trusting relationship was essential. Paul fostered that relationship and saw it as an important alliance that was necessary for the effective operation of his school.

I'm a great one for relationships and collegiality. So, one of the first things I did once we got the new Regional Network up and running, was to try and get together some whole of network activities and we ended up taking ourselves to all sorts of places... one of the things I've always done is worked at building relationships, taken my Regional Network Leader to lunch because I believe it is really important to have a good relationship with regional staff, even more important than good relationships with other PCOs (Principal Class Officers). (Paul)

Sam commented on the importance of sharing and being part of a team, having respect and confidence in colleagues. However, Sam also recognised that collegiality had been an important component of any previous structure; it was not confined to the Regional Network but was an essential component of it.

And even in the formal network structure, we set out to develop collegiate groups, so that everyone would be a member of at least one collegiate group which they could connect with, so we set out to develop those too. You were connected to an immediate collegiate group, so if you needed help with anything, they could help you out. (Sam)

Within the Regional Network structure there was more sharing of data because of the need to develop the strategic directions of the network. This could not have been possible without trustful relationships. Relationships were fuelled through the Regional Networks' *raison d'être*, which was to improve student outcomes across a district by fostering a collective, moral purpose. Sam said, "*The Regional Network structure was a catalyst for building relationships*". Sam's comment confirms that the important link of connection fuelled by relationships is an integral component of networks (Church et al., 2002; Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Jarillo, 1998; Kostova & Roth, 2003).

2b. Self-forming networks. The Regional Networks were the officially allocated group in which principals met for the purpose of building the capacity of the workforce through alignment and system-wide school improvement. However, when Regional Networks did not satisfy all their specific needs, principals did not hesitate to join other groups that they selected for themselves. In this sense the networks principals independently chose, fit the true definition of the features of networks, outlined in the literature review. True networks do not have mandated memberships (Church et al, 2002; Gulati, 1995; Hopkins, 2007). While principals indicated that they valued and appreciated the collegiality generated from the Regional Networks, 8/10 principals interviewed, mentioned that they sought out membership of other groups to fill their specific needs. Such self-forming networks co-existed alongside the Regional Network structure. For Belinda this chosen network was a secondary principals' association.

Belinda: *I have always gone to secondary principals groups apart from the network.*

Researcher: *You don't see belonging to different groups a mutually exclusive thing.*

Belinda: *Not at all. It's actually quite satisfying to talk about mutual concerns and one of the things with the Regional Networks was catering to both primary and secondary. Because they are different beasts.*

For Jennie it was the membership of the special schools' network that addressed the professional needs that were not satisfied by membership of the Regional Network.

That network (the Principals' Association of Special Schools), is far more valuable to me as a special school principal because we have commonality. The 84 schools are all different but we share commonalities that we can discuss and help each other with, because it is really difficult. (Jennie)

These self-chosen networks were not driven by the system. For Laura and Robert the need was in the international school's sector; for Melvin it was a sister school arrangement that preceded the Regional Network structure. *"I'm now and have been since 2010, part of an IB network that is thriving and growing and fully focused on an educational vision".* (Laura)

Robert had been a member of the Confederation of International Schools for some years, and spoke about the enriched professional experiences that membership of that organisation afforded him. *"I've done the training to become a team chair and that's been really terrific for me. I've been to Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam and next year I will be leading a team in central China somewhere".* (Robert)

Paul and Sam both belonged to smaller local networks of schools that also preceded the introduction of the Regional Network structure.

The really strong relationships with those schools was built probably in the preceding network time (prior to the Regional Networks), and if anything, we need to keep remembering that we are part of a larger group, not just our own cluster. (Paul)

Whether the membership of such groups gave an additional level of support through the continuation of older established relationships, or a common interest through curriculum specialisation, these networks filled a gap that the Regional Network could not fill. The two memberships co-existed independently of each other.

So we started this group initially of three, then we thought that wasn't really enough, we needed greater input and other people got quickly involved. So there are about five of us now and our criteria was, that we would invite people into the group who were fair dinkum about education. (Sam)

The need for connection, as expressed by the principals quoted above, was very strong. When an individual's needs of network membership were unfulfilled because the capacity of the network could not provide for those needs, the existing relationship was weakened. The features of networks as presented in the literature argue that networks need clarity of focus and common goals that lead members to collaborate on issues of mutual concern (Chapman & Hadfield, 2010; de Lima, 2010; Wohlstetter et al., 2003). Principals expressed the need to have a diverse range of associations, which the Regional Network structure only partially satisfied.

2c. Recognition and affirmation. Half the principals who were interviewed voiced feelings related to this theme. The emotions that were expressed ranged from appreciation for support and recognition received from system leaders, to the

opposite. Comments related to lack of recognition and support are discussed in the next chapter, which covers hindrances to the principal role. Certainly the principals who received affirmation for their work became motivated by that affirmation and this led to them taking on additional responsibility within the Regional Network, which broadened their perspectives on leadership and what they could contribute to the system. Melissa spoke about the development of her “leadership skills beyond my own school”, as a result of the support she was given by her RNL and the additional leadership role she held as Network Chair.

Belinda, who was a relatively new principal when the Regional Network structure was introduced, was flattered when the new leader approached her about being on the Executive. Recognition of her potential by the Regional Network Leader led to her continued involvement in the network at an executive level. That investment in her abilities through the recognition given, led to her leadership growth as she gained confidence to embrace new challenges. She also became a great supporter of the new structure and was strongly committed to the system’s vision for educational reform. Her role in the network helped her to anchor the system’s directions within her own school, as the professional learning that was generated through the network was focused on teaching and learning.

I was actually approached by the Regional Network Leader at the time, to see if I would be interested in being on the steering committee. First of all, that was very good for me because I thought [pause] Oooh, someone is even noticing that I exist and thinks that I could offer something and so, I said Yes, and I haven’t looked back since. (Belinda).

In spite of the years of experience in the role, principals valued recognition and affirmation of their work by system leaders as supportive of their role. Where

recognition and affirmation were present principals were motivated to take on new challenges. The sense of inclusion generated by the connection to the RNL and network colleagues led to principals taking on additional roles within the network, such as Melvin's leadership of the Instructional Rounds team in his network and Eliza's role within the Professional Development team within her network. Eliza felt she needed to "give back to the system", because her own success had been built on the recognition and affirmation of her skills by system leaders.

Theme 3. Learning

Professional learning through collaboration was the rationale behind the Regional Network structure as a tool to build the capacity of principals to improve their schools within each district. The three themes that are discussed under the broad category of Learning in this section are *3a. Connection with professional learning*; *3b. Opportunities arising from the change to Regional Networks*; and *3c. Engagement with system documents*. The last theme in this category, *3c. Engagement with system documents*, is included in this area rather than under the heading of *4. The system*, because system-generated documents were the stimulus for professional learning through documents that promoted leadership development, excellence in teaching and learning, or books that were distributed to principals as an expectation that they would read and discuss the contents within the Regional Network meetings. The vision that was generated through the professional learning expectations using the RNL as a facilitator was about team learning and knowledge sharing, which also took the form of network specific projects and initiatives such as those discussed in theme 1d.

3a. Connection with professional learning. All the principals acknowledged the expanse of professional learning that was offered to them by the system over that period. Professional learning took on a special focus for the system, as articulated in the *Blueprint* policies (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007a). The *Blueprint* policies were outlined in the introductory chapter. Eight of the ten principals were overwhelmingly positive about the levels and variety of professional learning opportunities available at the time. These were often facilitated through the Regional Networks. However, the networks also generated their own professional learning agenda based on the push from the centre. Whole-system professional learning days called *Big Days Out* (see explanation in Chapter 5), where all principals (~1,600) were expected to gather together in Melbourne, were another aspect of the reform agenda. These are referred to more specifically, when covering *Theme 4. The system*.

Eight principals spoke in glowing terms about the opportunities for learning, and the way that experience changed them as leaders. Belinda recalled the change in cultural direction from her first few years as principal, when the emphasis was more about “*administrative think*”. She believed that the move in thinking towards instructional leadership (that is a focus of pedagogy, teaching and learning (DEECD, 2009a; Elmore, City, Fiarman and Teitel, 2009; Zbar, Kimber and Marshall, 2008) has had a “*huge impact on the direction of schools*”. Eliza spoke of several programs that her teachers accessed to build their skills; she learned about these programs through the Regional Network.

We were involved in such things as the Teacher Professional Leave, Quality Teams, Mentoring training, so it was good and the network kept putting on the agenda that these types of things were what we were focusing on. (Eliza)

Laura also emphasised the changed focus from technical leadership to student learning and engagement. She saw this shift in emphasis supported by the clear direction from the centre. In her view this was a time of “*total knowledge creation*” and a “*time of opening up our minds to the world*”. Laura was impressed by the access she had to the teachings of “*top academics*” and the message being spread across the system that principals needed to be “*lifelong learners themselves and continue to develop their own professional knowledge as well as their teachers*”.

Martin, who was critical of the mandated membership of Regional Networks, valued the focus on data. He pointed out that if principals did not understand how to analyse the data it would be difficult to affect school improvement. Data literacy was a key aspect of the professional learning of principals and teachers over that period. (Hargreaves, 2003)

To have a continuous focus on data, you need to know your data inside out, you need to learn to analyse your data, you need to see what action you need to take to improve the areas that were not strong. There was a continuous focus on that which I thought it had never had that profile before. It had been given a very high profile and I thought that was a really, good thing, very necessary. (Martin)

Melissa recalled that the professional learning was system-wide. It was about building the capacity of teachers and future leaders, not only principals. Melissa mentioned that initially the specifics of learning about the data at the network level was confronting.

There were a lot of groups, professional learning, working parties over that time assessing how we were going, access to the data, so that was a little bit confronting. (Melissa)

However, the professional conversations and the development of leadership skills beyond the school level broadened her skills. A strong focus of the professional learning at the time was connecting with others and looking more widely at school improvement, taking on an international perspective (Fullan, 2000). Melissa took advantage of the scholarships available to principals at the time to broaden her horizons through travel to international conferences. At all times, she said, that professional sharing was an important function of the Regional Network.

Melvin highlighted the role that *Instructional Rounds* (Elmore et al., 2009) played in lifting the quality of professional conversations in the group. He observed that the conversations moved to evidence-based decision making. Melvin believed that the conversations are the “*real learning*” because you are involved in the “*depth of the struggle*”. For Robert this was “*a very innovative time, the most focused on education*”. Sam also recalled, that this time was a period with a strong focus on best practice in teaching and learning. The changed direction was achieved through building capacity, the articulation of clear goals and having a state wide leadership development structure (Fullan, 2003).

So, what that period did was to help us focus on the core role that we have of how that teaching and learning should happen. It was done through building our capacity, it was done via having a leadership structure throughout the state where the state had goals for schools. The state had a plan for developing principals. (Sam)

Professional learning was a key strategy of the system-wide school improvement vision articulated in the *Blueprint* policies (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007)). It was based on the need to build capacity across the system (Fullan, 2003; Hopkins, 2008) which would best occur if professional learning was facilitated

through all levels of the system through collaboration and knowledge-interchange. The Regional Network structure was a conduit for facilitating that knowledge sharing and skill building at the local level.

3b. Opportunities arising from the change to Regional Networks. An advantage of the Regional Network structure was its size, which was conducive to team learning. In the account of the Knowsley schools Leadbeater et al. (2005) describe the arrangement of local schools into three groups of 25. This was also the model adopted for Regional Networks because it allowed for the application and discussion of policy, and translation of the reform vision to the practical, local level. The team approach within a localised area such as a Regional Network focuses on common goals and the delivery of targeted professional learning that was context-specific. For example, one network's priority, which was based on the analysis of collective data, was to improve numeracy teaching.

All the principals interviewed mentioned the fact that the network was a vehicle for professional dialogue and sharing. Network discussions focused on how teaching and learning could be improved. This translated to a range of network projects and working parties that would foster knowledge-exchange and build trust (Kostova & Roth, 2003). Belinda commented that involvement in network initiatives broadened her horizons. A new culture evolved; it changed to one of professional discussion, which had the impact of developing her leadership skills to the point where she was motivated to give back to the system.

So in terms of my own personal growth I felt tremendous opportunities to show that I could not only learn but contribute to the system more broadly, so I did. The discussions happening now, on team teaching, about using flexible spaces, professional learning communities, those were the sorts of things that

weren't talked about before the Regional Networks. That's what we talk about now. And that was the vision for the network and how we move forwards. (Belinda)

Eliza also acknowledged that her involvement in the network developed her leadership skills.

It was all directed against leadership development principal capacity in the areas of expectation; you supported the development of new principals starting with their technical skills. It developed me as a leader within the network. (Eliza).

Eliza also spoke about how she benefited from the coaching program that she was able to access through the network. Laura saw the Regional Network as a place of “good educational discourse”; she valued the access to wider discussion.

It also created opportunities for wider discussion. They were platforms to maybe have a lunch with other principals around a common theme, the book club would then generate discussion around issues in your own schools. And then, from those discussions you may have followed up with other principals. (Laura)

Melissa highlighted the professional sharing that, for her, was a key feature of the network structure. “*There was always a lot of professional sharing and encouragement*”. Jennie too valued the professional dialogue that was a feature of the network meetings, even though she felt that the meetings were geared to the interests of mainstream schools. For Melvin the access to network data and the discussion around data analysis was particularly beneficial. He spoke about the opportunity to get to know other schools in the network as being insightful, “*it really*

opened your eyes". Robert felt that the network provided him with good opportunities to share ideas, which led him to have a "*clear idea of improving learning not only in your own school but in the network schools as well*". Paul expressed a similar view because the network encouraged principals to "*talk more*". Involvement in the Instructional Rounds classroom observations was a "*great opportunity*" for Sam to visit classrooms in network schools and to discuss data with colleagues. These professional interactions with trusted colleagues clarified the school improvement focus that was most relevant for his own setting, while increasing his understanding of the needs of other network schools.

It helped me to be a better principal. By doing Instructional Rounds, by having Sergiovanni there, by bringing in keynote speakers to talk to the whole network and we could bring in our assistant principals and literacy coordinators and so on. By having a focus on the data and what it was telling us, so you could develop your own skills in that area. (Sam)

The principals interviewed for this study valued and accessed the professional learning opportunities that were fostered through the Regional Network structure. The move to a better understanding of data analysis was a significant aspect of the professional learning agenda and this was facilitated by local groups of principals working together to broaden their skills. Veugelers and Zijlstra (2002) when speaking about the effectiveness of the Amsterdam networks emphasised that the collaboration and shared learning that was promoted through the structure reduced feelings of isolation and encouraged active participation in the shared learning agenda.

3c. Engagement with system documents. A large component of building the collective vision for educational reform was enacted through the distribution of

policy documents and resources which were produced as high quality publications. Principals commented on the money spent on the design of these publications. The symbolic message delivered to principals through those publications was that the messages they contained were very important, and that they were worthy of this high level of investment. Examples of such publications were: the *Developmental Framework for School Leaders* (DEECD, 2007b), printed on tracing paper to symbolise transparent leadership, and *The E5 Instructional Model* (DEECD, 2009a); and *School Improvement: A Theory of Action* (DE&T, 2007). Principals were also given a personal copy of a book to read each year, such as *Leadership on the Line* (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002); and *Disrupting Class* (Christensen et al., 2008). Symbolically the gifting of books reinforced the message of lifelong learning and it was expected that these books would be discussed in network meetings. At larger professional development events for principals, such as central office meetings or *Big Days Out*, gifts were given to principals randomly if they could correctly answer questions about the books that were set readings.

Nine of the ten principals interviewed, spoke about their engagement with such system documents. Paul was the only principal who did not specifically comment on these but he did mention in relation to the theme of *Learning*, that there was too much too quickly and this point is picked up in *Theme 3c. Disconnect with professional learning* and *Theme 3d. Lack of engagement with system documents*, which are discussed in the next chapter. The other principals, in discussing their levels of engagement with such documents, varied in their uptake. The documents that specifically related to teaching, learning and leadership development were most highly valued, particularly *The Developmental Framework for School Leaders* (DEECD, 2007b); and the *E5 Instructional Model* (DEECD, 2009a). Laura

especially engaged with the *E5* document and the *Developmental Framework for School Leaders*.(DEECD, 2007b)

The Effective Schools Model. I still use the Effective Schools Model today. It's a strong visual and practical model for school councils to understand, for teachers to understand and to use it to articulate the vision. The principal performance development was really around the Leadership Development Framework where you could see the areas to strengthen, areas you needed to build on. The E5 Instructional model was a fantastic model because our school is now an IB school. That was the basis on which we were able to articulate an inquiry-based model of learning. (Laura)

The documents mentioned by Laura were very practical texts that focused on leadership development and curriculum planning. Belinda commented they not only broadened her leadership perspective but gave her practical strategies with which to build leadership capacity in her school. *"It certainly broadened my leadership and gave me lots of ideas in my own school and I was trying to build leadership capacity in my school."* (Belinda)

Eliza concurred when she said, *"they help you know how to do things"*. However, both Belinda and Eliza mentioned the suspicion with which some colleagues approached the principal readings but, in the end, interviewed principals reported that they took what was relevant for them and discarded what was not. This was true in Martin's case. However, he did find value in the *Developmental Framework for School Leaders* (DEECD, 2007b), and used that in his school. *"That remains a strong document. It was helpful for us, our school and the system. It was a wonderful piece of work"*. (Martin)

Melvin had been involved in the development of the *E5 Instructional Model* (DEECD, 2009a) and he commented that it was “*one of the key pieces of innovations of better practice that came out of that time and the networks were involved in that*”. However, he believed that the *E5* document was misunderstood by some principals. They used it as a lock-step curriculum development document. Melvin believed it was intended to be only a guide. For Sam such system-generated documents were important because they provided opportunities to reflect on different components of leadership. He particularly referred to the *Developmental Framework for School Leaders* (DEECD, 2007b) when he said,

We are all different and some of us are going to be stronger in some areas than others. I think it was excellent. It was about the conversations and reflection, and seeing how you fit into the big picture. (Sam)

Principals valued the whole system approach to supporting change through the development of rich resources, which facilitated alignment to the goals of lifting school outcomes by supporting the professional growth of principals and teachers across the system to transform it (Hopkins, 2007). Access to such resources as principals' readings and leadership development programs created a climate of lifelong learning that fostered agency and purpose to solve problems (Chapman & Hadfield, 2010).

Theme 4. The System

Regional Networks were a construct of the system and as such the structure could not be seen in isolation from it. While some of the themes analysed within this category focus specifically on the operations of Regional Networks, at the core is the connection and influence of the centre. Regional Networks were created by the

system as a vehicle for system-wide improvement and in this regard the agenda of each Regional Network was driven from that perspective. Government schools, as a group, made up the system therefore it was critical for the success of the school improvement agenda that principals understood their role within that context.

4a. Systems Thinking, alignment All the principals who were interviewed for this project expressed a strong commitment to the system, even though they may have been critical of aspects of it, such as Jennie's view that special needs schools were not considered enough or appreciated with regard to their unique challenges. Jennie certainly saw the system as "*driving the improvement agenda*", but says she never felt "*totally part of the system*". Nevertheless she felt an alliance to the system and played an important role on the Executive of her Regional Network. She expressed this view when she said,

I feel very strongly, I don't want to be that principal who is in the SDS (Specialist Development School) who doesn't want to come to the meetings and who disconnects from things. (Jennie)

Belinda found it rewarding to be part of a system and she saw it as a reciprocal investment from both the system and the individual for mutual benefit.

I've always found it very satisfying being part of a system. If you are part of the system and the system is investing improving the system it is also investing in me, and my school. (Belinda)

Eliza's view was similar. Although she saw this period as a more directive time, she was engaged in the vision. "*We are part of a system, we are not little islands by ourselves, so I was quite happy with it*". Eliza felt comfort in that directedness; for her it was an affirmation that she was not on a solo journey. She felt

it was “*good to be reminded that we are part of a system and that these are the goals.*” For Laura allegiance to the system was also a strong imperative. Laura, one of the most experienced and independent principals interviewed for this study, expressed dismay at lack of acknowledgement of her skills by the system; yet her loyalty to the system remained.

We are educators in the state education system, there is a system in place and we are committed to it and we want it to be the best it can be. (Laura)

Laura pointed out that the allegiance to the system sometimes meant that principals went along with things, such as the development of the network strategic plan, that they did not really see the value in. However, principals knew that Regional Network Leaders had to deliver on this and they felt a loyalty to them and wanted to support them.

I think, ultimately, it came down to the nature of the various principals in the network and their view of what their role in the network should be. We are educators in the state education system. There is a system in place and we are committed to it and we want it to be the best it can be. So in those days when we were developing strategic plans I think we were still doing it for the Department, so that they (the Regional Network Leaders) were accountable to those above them. (Laura)

Although Martin expressed his frustration and disappointment with the system regarding the re-structure of his Regional Network (see *Theme 1e. Mandated membership*, and *Theme 4d. Arbitrary nature of decision making*, which is discussed in the next chapter) he remained committed to the system's vision. He understood the importance of alignment which, he believed, justified a directed approach. “*The*

centre has to have its agenda, we are part of a state system, don't just leave it to whatever." The "*don't just leave it to whatever*" comment was made in relation to the change in government that brought about the end of Regional Networks. The alternative was a laissez-faire approach, which he found disappointing.

Melissa described the Systems Thinking approach of the *Blueprint* (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007a) period as follows, "*it flowed down as a tiered approach to school improvement.*" That approach stemmed from the "*passionate*" direction of the Deputy Secretary. Melissa recalled the *Big Days Out* as vehicles for the Department's leadership team's "*challenging discussions around the table.*" Melvin defined this period as having an underlying notion of "collective responsibility". He summed up his view as follows:

At the end of the day we are part of the same system, the same employer, despite what people may think. Yeah, you can say that I am a system man, a believer in the system, the greater good. (Melvin)

Robert, like Laura, was one of the most experienced principals. He "*never had a great deal of time for central bureaucracy*", but did have a lot of respect for the vision of the day. He saw it as a time when "*we were building the system*" because of its focus on building professional learning teams. However, Robert still maintained a strong sense of autonomy in his role as principal. He did what worked for him and his school.

As far as the network is concerned I feel fairly autonomous and I think I had the courage or stupidity to ignore anything that could have been interpreted as a directive that I didn't agree with. (Robert)

Paul acknowledged that the system did go some way towards alignment in offering the various professional learning opportunities but, like Robert and Martin, he did not fully embrace all the system's directedness, particularly in relation to principals' readings, and he appreciated his role in the system. He understood what was relevant for him in order to achieve the system's vision for his own school's circumstances.

The system at that time did go some way towards alignment in offering the various professional learning opportunities. (Paul)

Sam expressed very clearly how the system built the capacity of its workforce. *"It was done via having a leadership structure throughout the state where the state had goals for schools, the state had a plan for developing principals"*. (Sam) He really appreciated the sense of direction that was a feature of that time.

I felt for the first time that there was a sense of direction; there was a sense that we were professionals. Given a book to read, a book a year to read, I thought was a fabulous thing. (Sam)

Sam equated the system approach to what he would do in his own school at the local level, *"that sort of thing was happening at the state-wide level, and that was filtering through to schools"*. Sam found that just being part of a system was supportive. His network leader was always respectful of him as a leader and supportive of what he was doing in his school.

I actually felt supported and valued because I feel that I am part of a system. The line manager respected what I was doing and believed I had good

structures and practices in my school and was supporting the things I was doing in my school. (Sam)

The principals interviewed for this project all had a strong understanding of the part they played in the system and their interdependence and inter-connection with it. This is made clear by the comments of the principals that are included above. Although their schools were different they understood their relational role within the system. They maintained a loyalty to it, even though this was not always reciprocated. Principals demonstrated good will and loyally clung to the ideals that were espoused through the reform agenda of the system.

4b. Feelings of excitement about that time of educational reform. Eight of the ten principals interviewed expressed excitement about this period as a time of unique vision, opportunity and reform. Part of this excitement was generated by the investment by the system in the high quality resources, such as the documents discussed in theme 3c. The principals who did speak about their excitement of this period were effusive and nostalgic about their comments. However, Paul and Jennie did not comment about this theme in their interviews and there were no questions related to excitement about educational reforms asked by the researcher. Nevertheless, eight principals offered such comments. Melvin spoke of the “*huge opportunities*” available for principals to visit other schools and see different perspectives. “*Huge opportunity. Huge opportunity to get outside your own neighbourhood and look at the same struggles in a different context*”. (Melvin)

Belinda found the changes “*exciting*” because it provided her with so many tools, as a new principal, to do the work that she wanted to do.

It was a new and exciting time. It was a great time for schools and for the development of teaching and learning. This was a fantastic time for me,

again possibly because I was a relatively new principal and finding my way, and all this stuff just gave me the tools to do what I wanted to do. So I thought it was a fantastic time. (Belinda)

Eliza was already a very experienced principal when the *Blueprint* policies (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007)) were introduced, however she regarded this as “*probably the most exciting time in that there was a whole system approach*”. She spoke about the opportunities afforded to her staff through such initiatives as teachers’ study leave and the *E5 Instructional Model* (DEECD, 2009a). “*Yes, I think they were exciting times*”. She mentioned the innovation and the quantity of projects that came out from the Department over those years. These were all about improvement of students learning and building the capacity of the workforce.

Laura described the period as follows: “*There was also this charismatic change going on that enveloped us all*”. She also spoke about the “*excitement*” surrounding the *Blueprint* policies (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007a). She saw the Regional Networks as inspirational in promotion of strategic planning at the school level. Laura reminisced about the “*high energy*” and “*challenging agenda*” of those years that she found so invigorating. While she acknowledged that principals were “*almost inundated with documentation*”, a point that supported Paul’s earlier sentiments of feeling overwhelmed by the quantum and scope of initiatives, she regarded this period as “*highly charged educationally*”. It was not just rhetoric, from Laura’s point of view, because policy was supported by a plethora of resources.

To look back into that period and see a government that had a really clear educational vision, that was backed up by resources at the regional level to then come to network meetings and share those, the vision and to share the

documentation that was coming through and generate discussion among the principals, was really, really excellent. (Laura)

Martin, in spite of his unfortunate experiences of being re-allocated to a Regional Network that did not work for him (see Chapter 7 *Theme 1e. Mandated membership*), described that era in glowing terms. “*I thought it was fantastic, it was a new beginning and it was well resourced*”. For Melissa a distinctive feature of this period was that the clear direction that came from the centre.

Leadership vision and the leadership change management plan, were supported with clear direction, personnel, resources and documents. I see it as a good time in education for our leadership and our schools. (Melissa)

Robert, with 45 years of experience in the system, regarded this time as having the “most purpose”, a time of strong alignment, “everybody was on the same tram”.

Sam felt a “*real nostalgia*” for the period because he, like Robert, saw this as a time of strong alignment and action.

We are doing things, we are going places, we are innovating, we have principals doing observations, talking about teaching and learning, we’ve got collegiate groups going, we’re sharing performance plans, we’re looking at data together, we are doing all these things, all the important stuff of education. (Sam)

Sam concluded his comments by saying, “I believe that time was one of the golden eras in education.” He justified this opinion by saying that it was a time “when the Department was really focused, we had support, we had a vision that came all the way down that we could connect with; I certainly felt I was connected to it.” (Sam)

As previously discussed in the literature review, English and Ehrich (2015) bring a new perspective to concepts of educational leadership through the provocation of school leaders to be connoisseurs. Ideas of connoisseurship and “leading beautifully”, link nicely to the expressions of excitement that principals experienced as members of Regional Networks because of the perception that staid ideas about leadership were being disrupted. Principals’ voices contain a new passion and excitement when recalling this era of educational reform. Therefore, it is relevant to connect the work of English and Ehrich (2016) on leadership as connoisseurship with the excitement of the quest for change that formed the backstory to the Regional Network structure and which emerges as a theme from the principals’ transcripts. The excitement of the times that has been captured through the principals’ recollections outlined above, reveals a passion and desire for lifelong learning that was fuelled by the strong vision to improve educational outcomes for all students through a different way of doing things. The system strongly invested in the capacity of its principals as educational leaders in a manner that had not previously been experienced. Notions of leadership were redefined through the introduction of *The Developmental Framework for School Leaders* (DEECD, 2007). This document addressed the dimensions of leadership not only as a technical capability, but also as human, cultural, symbolic and educational forms of leadership. Educational leaders were encouraged to reconsider their professional growth within a developmental continuum, which provided not only a vision for a new order of educational leadership but a practical guide to it. The framework offered a developmental process that encompassed a broad range of capabilities and that fit within English and Ehrich’s (2016) definition of connoisseurship. Examples such as a cultural awareness and reflexivity and an aesthetic vision beyond just the

technical, that comes from opportunities for intellectual challenge such as higher level professional learning such as that encouraged through the continuum in *The Developmental Framework for School Leaders* (DEECD, 2007).

This concludes the discussion of themes that have been identified as helping principals in their role. Within this chapter 11 themes were identified as assisting principals in their work as a result of their membership of a Regional Network. These 11 themes were categorised under the broader but interrelated headings of *Regional Network Operations*; *Relationships*; *Learning*; and *The system*. In the following chapter 10 additional themes are discussed, also aligning with these four headings. The themes that follow in Chapter 7 were perceived to hinder the principals' role. Some of the themes presented in Chapter 7 negatively mirror themes that have been discussed within Chapter 6. These are: *Theme 1d. Projects and initiatives that did not assist*; *Theme 2e. Lack of recognition and affirmation*; *Theme 3c. Disconnect with professional learning*; and *3d. Lack of engagement with System documents*.

Chapter 7. How the Networks Hindered Principals

By the light of such themes we can navigate and explore such universes. (van Manen, 1990, p. 90)

Introduction

This chapter discusses the themes that hindered principals in their work. Table 4 below shows a summary of the themes covered within this chapter. As with the themes identified in the previous chapter these themes are classified under the four headings of *Regional Network Operations*; *Relationships*; *Learning*; and *The system*. As mentioned at the end of Chapter 6 some themes negatively mirror those discussed in Chapter 6. These are: *Theme 1d. Projects and initiatives that did not assist*; *Theme 2e. Lack of recognition and affirmation*; *Theme 3c. Disconnect with professional learning*; and *3d. Lack of engagement with System documents*.

Table 4

Themes About What Hindered Principals

1. Regional Network Operations	2. Relationships	3. Learning	4. The system
1d. Projects and initiatives that did not assist.	2c. Sense of abandonment and alienation.	3d. Disconnect with professional learning.	4 c. Impacts policy change.
1e. Mandated membership.	2d. Lack of recognition and affirmation.	3e. Lack of engagement with system documents.	4d. Arbitrary decision-making.
			4e. Nepotism & favouritism.
			4.f. Excesses of the system.

Theme 1. Regional Network Operations

A variety of projects and initiatives were introduced through the Regional Networks with the goal of lifting student outcomes across the schools in a network. Decisions about projects were usually based on data analysis of broad achievement levels across all the schools involved, for example in the key areas of English and Mathematics. Some projects focused on lifting teacher practice. One such project was principals' classroom observations of teaching within a neighbouring school. This was called Instructional Rounds and has previously been explained in Chapter 4. Depending on the perceptions of individual principals initiatives such as this were not always favourably received. There was one project, the development of a network strategic plan that was enforced by the centre. Regional Networks, led by their RNL, were expected to develop the plan based on the data generated across the network. Regional offices generated combined data sets to facilitate this process.

1d. Projects and initiatives that did not assist. While the principals interviewed for this study valued many of the projects and initiatives that became the focus of their Regional Network meetings, they universally regarded one network project unfavourably - the development a network strategic plan. The requirement to develop a strategic plan and its format was mandated by the centre. Belinda, Eliza, Martin, Robert, Melvin, Paul and Sam did not find any value in developing the plan. They were critical of the irrelevant detail in the plan and the time spent on developing it.

Look, I found that a bit of an artificial exercise really, maybe too much time was spent on it. In the end what we want are the same things, improved outcomes for students, improved wellbeing, strong transitions, we want to use

our resources to the greatest effect, so there was a lot of fiddly stuff that went with that. (Martin)

It would have been better just to have a couple of goals, and this is how we are going to do it, which I guess that is what a strategic plan is. But it took a long time to develop and I don't know how much people would have referred to it all the time. (Eliza)

All principals agreed that a few dot points, as a general focus for the network plan, would have sufficed. Robert could see the value of having some broad goals, but described the frustration principals expressed at being required to write the plan as follows:

Oh No! What a pain to have to do this! We do it in our own schools, we don't want to do it in the network too! But basically, the Executive wrote it, put it up on the screen and said: Well, here it is. (Robert)

The development of the network strategic plan was regarded as compliance exercise; it took up a huge amount of the network's time and was largely developed by the Regional Network Leader and presented to the network for sign-off. Laura did not comment on the network strategic plan in her interview and as she did not mention it, it does not seem to have been important to her. The network strategic plan, it appears, had little meaning for individual schools. All schools are different, as Sam points out, and each school already has their own strategic plan.

It's OK to have a focus, but when you get to the school level, the school strategic plan reflects more the needs of your community, your students, staff, based on their own data, and their community's priorities. (Sam)

Jennie, whose school was not a mainstream school, did not find any value in the plan, which had no relevance at all to her Special Needs setting.

It wasn't really relevant to our school. No, no. I was involved in the development of the plan as part of the Executive but it was largely, driven by the Regional Network Leader. Some of it, I thought, was good in that it outlined how we were going to behave as a network, but the targets weren't relevant to me. (Jennie)

Many of the network projects and initiatives generated through the Regional Network structure facilitated more purposeful interactions between schools as they shared learning experiences and resources. They collaborated on curriculum planning and committed to collective projects that built the skills of teachers, such as literacy and numeracy improvement plans. Wohlstetter et al. (2003) also endorse the concept of networked agency as they highlight that the strength of networks lies in their collective capacity to work together to solve problems of mutual concern. However actors in the network must see the relevance and value for their participation. Where the connection to the project was not seen or owned, as Jennie expressed, the network plan's targets were not relevant to her school so that the focus on common goals (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001) was not as strong. The absence of a strong focus on common goals was also a point of contention with principals in relation to the development of the network strategic plan because each school already had their own strategic plan in place. The determination by the centre for each network to develop a strategic plan demonstrated a weakness in the decision-making power of the network structure because the Executive did not have the capacity to cast aside directives that they saw as irrelevant. The centre directed and steered policy (Ball, 2008) although there was some capacity for the Executive to

develop their own projects and initiatives. According to Church et al. (2003) the decision making model for networks should foster diversity, decentralisation, democratisation and dynamism. This was not evident in the Regional Network structure because of the strong and definitive accountability focus that came from the centre through the conduit of the Regional Network Leader (DEECD, 2010).

Apart from the strategic plan, not all principals saw value in some of the other network projects such as *Instructional Rounds*, which was generally considered to be a positive learning experience. Laura did not relate well to *Instructional Rounds*. This point was discussed in detail in Chapter 5 when presenting an analysis of Laura's extended extract. She thought it was "tokenistic" and an unrealistic deficit model of classroom observation. Therefore, depending on the needs and data of the individual network, projects and initiatives varied.

For Jennie, the principal of a Specialist Development School, however, the projects generated by network data were not as relevant as they were to her mainstream colleagues. The ability of the Regional Network to adequately address the needs of all schools in the network has been covered in theme 2b. *Self-forming Networks*, which appears in the previous chapter.

1e. Mandated membership The mandated membership of the newly formed Regional Networks was a contentious issue for many principals and voluntary membership of networks is well-documented in the literature as being an important feature of networks (Gulati et al., 2000; Hadfield et al., 2006; Hopkins, 2008). The principals who were interviewed for this study were very aware of the resentment felt by some members as the new structure was implemented. The purpose given by the regional office was that it would be beneficial to re-form boundaries in line with local government areas and to create groups of schools of a similar size, around 25

schools. While eight principals did not find a personal problem with the re-structure (Belinda, Eliza, Jennie, Robert, Paul, Melissa and Melvin), they were certainly aware of the resentment this caused within the new structure.

It was a forced merge, which was accepted begrudgingly, I think, but as there is no choice, because what if it won't work, if we didn't do it... I think there was a level of suspicion from some people in the network that we were being done to instead of developing our own agenda. That was never my view but it certainly was the view expressed by some principals, who therefore, you felt were high jacking the agenda, challenging where things are coming from.
(Belinda)

Jennie, as a member of the Executive of a merged network, faced open hostility from some principals who felt disenfranchised by the move. She described the merge as, “*Not really successful, to be honest. Two, very different networks; two very different ways of operating*”. Eliza and Belinda also commented on the difficulties. Belinda felt that part of the blame rested with the system, the other with the individual principals who could not let their resentment pass. Belinda commented that it took about three years for the two cultures to settle. By that time the Regional Network structure had been abandoned.

They were so different in their approach and I think that is what made it difficult. There were personalities that lost some of their power base, I think. That's human nature but it had to be worked through and I'd say it took about 3 years. I don't think it completely settled but it's more settled now.
(Belinda)

Eliza recalled that after some teething problems the network settled down quite well. Networks take time for relationships to form (Church et al., 2002). Paul took a more philosophical approach. While the new structure impacted on him considerably, with about two thirds of former colleagues being re-located, he regarded it as an opportunity to form new relationships.

Most of the schools in the new network came from the previous ---- area so I missed out on being with a lot of my former colleagues. So I did find when the new networks were formed there were a lot of relationships that needed to be built. I had to forge a lot of new links. Two thirds of the schools were ones I hadn't worked with previously and one third were the City of ---- schools, who had been in the previous network I had been in. (Paul)

Robert also took a similar view; he knew he would keep up the relationships with existing colleagues and looked forward to forging new connections. He said, “*I made lots of new contacts in the new group*”. Laura valued any sort of network structure because of the connection it provided. (Burt, 2000) Not bothered by the mandated membership directive, she loved meeting with colleagues in the new structure where she felt that there was a vibrant energy, which she attributed to the new and challenging agenda.

I loved it. I wanted to go. Which is different to now, as I sit here with you. It was high energy because the government had a high challenging agenda, that we all wanted our schools to be achieving the best for our schools. (Laura)

The greatest negative impact of the mandated membership surfaced where principals experienced a second, mandated change to the structure. This occurred

after the first 12 months in some networks. This second change did not affect many schools but it did affect schools on the tail end of a district, usually within a growth corridor. Martin and Sam, who had become very attached to their new Regional Network and were working positively with colleagues on network projects, were negatively affected in this way. The reason given for this second change according to Martin was that his school was on the fringe of a growth corridor. Within a few years the Regional Network that he was originally allocated to would become too large. Therefore three Regional Networks were created out of the original two. Martin was given no choice in this second move and although he did appeal the decision, it was not re-considered. *“Well, they just did it anyway, whether you liked it or not”*. He saw no sense in this second move and it had a negative impact on his school. This had the effect of Martin becoming very disillusioned, withdrawing from the new network's activities. He had also lost the connections he had made with his former Regional Network because he no longer had access to the common initiatives they had worked on together, such as enrolment protocols and transition policies. Martin felt that he had been cut adrift. He did not have a lot in common with the schools in the new network.

The level of collaboration in the new network was quite different and the focus was different. It didn't actually match our needs. So I found myself playing a lesser role in the network, you were just taken out and plonked into a new one, the network already had a life of its own. I was devastated.

(Martin)

Martin's negative experience of being re-allocated to a network against his will contrasted with the positive view of networks that sees connections as

interconnecting nodes that tie members together, as joint activities lead to greater trust, community and relationships (Castells, 2000).

Sam's school was also affected by the re-structure of his network. Although the explanation given by the region was that schools were re-grouped along local government lines, Sam did not believe this was the real reason, as the schools in the new group did not really correspond to the local government boundary. Sam felt it was more about spreading the lower-achieving schools across other Regional Networks. However, this was not stated as the reason by the regional office.

What happened was, we ended up merging with another group and what they did was, they merged our group with another and we ended up with, like a bean shape because what they tried to do was, I think they were trying to be strategic and make sure that we didn't have a network of schools that were struggling. So we had this really un-geographical shape. (Sam)

The issue of mandated network membership was a contentious issue for the principals interviewed. Although they personally might not have been affected by such a move, they perceived the resentment in some colleagues, which was described to the researcher as manifesting itself in uncooperative behaviour during network meetings and refusal to participate in network activities. This reluctance, as observed by Jennie, Eliza and Belinda, was attributed to an inability to change, or feelings of powerlessness. The new Regional Networks struggled where two vastly different cultures came together. In such situations the feelings generated ranged from disenfranchisement and alienation, to feelings of optimism about the opportunities for making new connections. However, it was the compulsory nature of the imposed decision that caused feelings of resentment. Network Executives worked hard to merge the differences between the groups by re-visiting protocols, values and

building relationships. Inkpen and Tsang (2005) view relationships within a network as a social capital resource. The building of social capital with the new Regional Networks would build trust (Kostova & Roth, 2003) on which common projects could be developed. This was more successful in some cases than in others. Aspects of this theme are expanded upon when discussing theme 4d. *Arbitrary nature of decision-making*.

Theme 2. Relationships

As already stated throughout this study, relationships are at the heart of network collaboration. The social capital generated through connection builds the capacity of principals to work as teams and share knowledge. Relationships are an integral component of Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). In cases where the relationship with the system soured because principals felt they had not been treated fairly or that their skills and contribution was not valued, feelings of alienation and disillusionment followed. In such cases principals withdrew into their own schools and their contribution to shared learning with the Regional Network structure was minimised. Themes discussed under the heading of Relationships in this chapter are theme 2c. *Sense of abandonment and alienation*; and theme 2d. *Lack of recognition and affirmation*.

2c. Sense of abandonment and alienation. Six out of the ten principals interviewed openly expressed disappointment and frustration about the premature end of the Regional Network structure. Belinda thought that the vision was well underway and regretted that it was not realised. She said, "*So the vision was well on the way. It got underway and I think it's a pity it stopped*". Laura expressed her dismay at the depletion of resources and the lack of direction since the structure

changed. She felt that the network had been weakened, and described the vacuum in educational leadership that followed. She saw the lack of interest that affected attendance at network meetings. She spoke of her own lack of motivation to attend meetings since the focus and structure had changed.

I think you don't know what you've got until it's gone, and the last few years we have seen in our network, a deterioration in numbers, a lack of vision educationally, we've had a rotating number of whatever they are called now. It has been disastrous. (Laura)

Although Laura expressed disappointment by the lack of affirmation that she received from the system, she felt a strong affiliation with her Regional Network, and mourned its passing. Martin describes the void that he felt in a system that is in “*suspended animation*”. He was still upset about the second, enforced change to his membership of a Regional Network. He felt that decisions that were made by the centre and the regional office were done in an arbitrary fashion. (This is further explored in theme 4d. *Arbitrary decision-making*). He was angry about nonsensical, haphazard disruptions to structures that would be better left alone.

I think there is a lot we can learn from that time. Things we should be doing and some things we shouldn't be doing. If there is a shift away from autonomy to more direction from the centre, it should be done strategically. (Martin)

Melvin felt the loss of regional support staff since the structure has changed. He really valued the sharing and aggregating of data to assist the network and individual schools to work more constructively. This no longer occurred and he regarded this as a loss to both the system and individual schools.

Well, there is no-one aggregating data anymore at the regional level, there is nobody sharing; all that is gone. So, look there might be someone in there doing it but it certainly isn't coming out, I think that is a loss to the system as well as to individual schools. (Melvin)

Robert was regretful of the loss of the Regional Network Leader role, which he considered to be a valuable role. He viewed those years as “good” years and spoke about the loss of focus that took over the network when that leadership role ended. He talked about the frustration he experienced the first two years after the Regional Network structure was abandoned, when “*nothing happened, nobody wanted to make a decision, nobody wanted to do anything*”. Robert was no longer motivated to attend network meetings, feeling that he was better off doing work at his own school. Therefore, he and his Assistant Principal came to an arrangement where they now attend meetings turnabout.

They were three good years and I thought the role of the Regional Network Leader was a very good one and I was very sorry to see the role abandoned with the change of government, nearly five years ago, now. When that ended it just lost focus. (Robert)

Paul spoke about the less-directed approach since the Regional Network structure ended as not being a positive thing, necessarily. He highlighted the lack of collegiality in the larger meeting structure that followed the Regional Networks, with twice as many schools now in the group.

We probably gained a little bit of independence but that is not necessarily a good thing because we don't have the same opportunity for collegiality that we used to have. Network meetings are larger, SARPPS [Senior Advisors

replaced RNLs] *have more responsibilities, less time. Meetings are more about information giving rather than collegiality.* (Paul)

Principals were disappointed when the Regional Network structure came to an end as there was no strong vision to replace it. The structure was still in its early stages of development when it was abandoned and principals missed the shared purpose and sense of agency (Chapman & Hadfield, 2010; Wohlstetter et al., 2003) that had developed through collaborative projects. The relationships and connection (Hargreaves, 2010) that were maturing after two years of the structure being in place were now changing again.

2d. Lack of recognition and affirmation. Lack of recognition and acknowledgement led to principals going their own way. Jennie, the principal of the Specialist Development School, felt frustrated by the system's lack of support for schools that were not mainstream. This attitude was reflected in the Regional Network's activities and emphasis on data. Jennie dealt with the feeling of lack of consideration by going her own way but taking from the Regional Network experience what worked for her. As already mentioned she was a member of the Executive and she did value the contact with her mainstream colleagues.

We've always had to modify change, implement and develop things for ourselves, because we have never fitted into the system. And we are never catered for by the system, and I understand the whys and wherefores about that, and I have always had the opportunity to, to be autonomous in that way because we just don't fit into the mainstream. (Jennie)

However, real recognition and affirmation came from her special school principals' network. While she acknowledged that the Regional Network Leader was

supportive, she found that the lack of deep understanding of her context, previously mentioned in other comments, rendered the support that was given as well-meaning but superficial. *“I always felt we were not represented, there was never any mention of representation special schools (Jennie)*

Martin found the support and affirmation he required only when he sourced it for himself. This happened as a result of his own initiative in employing a leadership coach for his school. He did not find the level of support he needed within the Regional Network structure. As previously mentioned, Martin did not consider the Regional Network Leaders that he dealt with to be particularly effective. *“The best support for our school improvement came from our leadership coach and that was just like the voice saying: what are your goals, what are you doing about them and keep true to those goals?” (Martin)*

Paul readily accepted that support was only forthcoming if you asked for it. Paul believed that if he did not initiate and foster the regional relationships, regional staff would be too busy with other principals, who were more proactive in expressing a need for support.

My belief is that you only get the support if you ask for it. I always made it my business to keep the Regional Network Leader in the loop so they knew what was going on in my school, and also, so that others in the regional leadership team would also know about my school. But I got the impression that if I hadn't worked on those relationships with them they wouldn't have had time to do that with me. (Paul)

Laura was very disillusioned by the lack of recognition and affirmation that she received from the system over all her years of experience. While she appreciated the resources that the system put into professional learning for principals over that

period, and said that principals felt valued because of that, her personal situation was different. Laura felt that because she was outspoken in the past regional staff have not valued her views, or sought them. For that reason Laura felt that she had not been valued at the network level by regional staff. Even as an experienced principal who was very confident in her role, Laura would have appreciated some affirmation of her achievements by regional leaders. She spoke passionately of her disappointment at the lack of recognition of her abilities, which led to feelings of being discarded and excluded even though her school was a very successful one. This lack of affirmation by regional staff had, at times, led to Laura questioning her own abilities. The affirmation she so deeply craved, came through her membership of an international principals' network.

I know this is a personal thing, but I have never felt valued at a network level or from a regional level. As you get older, you feel that your views, you don't want to, because I used to speak quite a lot at network meetings, you also don't want to be seen as a big mouth or a loud mouth and I know my views, well I felt my views, were never respected by people who were in those network meetings that came from the region. (Laura)

Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski's (2002) stories of wounded leaders previously referred to in the literature review highlight the emotional toll that lack of recognition of principals' work can take. This hurt can compound and be carried forward as illustrated in the case of Nancy, whose school had made significant progress but was unrecognised by the system. "It felt like turning a knife in the wound" (2002, p.81). Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski comment that "she fell into the trap of thinking this should not bother her, but as the story shows, it did. A year later, she was still visibly upset by the experience" (2002, p.81). Ackerman and

Maslin-Ostrowski argue that the self-awareness of one's own need for recognition is the first step to healing. For Laura, who felt she had been overlooked by the system, this led to her seeking affirmation in her self-chosen network comprising of an IB group of schools (see *Theme 2b Self-forming networks*). From her perspective within this environment, she was valued and affirmed as a skilled and respected leader. Unfortunately, for Laura, that affirmation did not come from her own system and she felt let down by that. Nevertheless, her resilience, confidence and passion for school improvement allowed her to remain optimistic within her role and she led her school on to many successes. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) describe leadership as alternating "between cycles of risk and loss, jubilation and frustration, openness and fear. Leaders therefore respond to these cycles in different ways" (p.12)

Regional Networks were driven and created by the system (DEECD, 2010), therefore the structure did not provide the independent capacity for feedback and reflection that was a key feature of the effective Educations Networks discussed in the literature review. The system in which the Regional Networks existed did not give an independent voice to individual members because its governance arrangements operated within the system's guidelines. The Amsterdam Network (Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2002) assessed the effectiveness of the network by surveying participants at each meeting. Participation is seen as vital and through participation, policy can be deconstructed from a bottom-up perspective. Mullen and Kochan (2000) found a similar culture within the West Alabama Learning Coalition (WALC) which featured shared leadership with members evaluating each meeting, rating the best aspects and those requiring improvement. Had there been a greater level of participation and sharing of skills within the Regional Network structure, a higher level of relationship in which all members were affirmed and valued, may have

followed. The analogy of the WALC as a spiders web of interconnecting threads (Mullen & Kochan, 2000), each strand being both weak and strong, represents the organic nature of the network which was changing and evolving because it did not have the restrictions of size and structure imposed by a system-owned structure. In that respect, the Regional Network lacked the independence of other Education Networks outlined in the literature review which were not inhibited by the expectations and restrictions placed on their structure and operations by system ownership.

Theme 3. Learning

While professional learning was a driving force in building the capacity of principals across the system as the first step in lifting standards in all schools, if the learning opportunities that were generated through the Regional Networks were not seen as relevant to individual principals, they did not engage with those activities. The two themes related to learning that was not favourably received by principals are theme 3c. *Disconnect from professional learning* and 3d. *Lack of engagement with system documents*. These two themes are dealt with together because of their overlap.

3c. Disconnect from professional learning

3d. Lack of engagement with system documents. The two principals who expressed some criticism of aspects of the professional learning were Jennie and Paul. Jennie, as the principal of a Specialist Development School, found that a lot of the professional learning that came via the Regional Network was less relevant to her setting, because it was dominated by mainstream data sets. However, she acknowledged that some of the sessions were “*beneficial*”, however “*a lot of time it*

was to do with things like NAPLAN, things that were irrelevant to us, as a school."

(Jennie)

Paul was critical of the quantity of professional learning that was directed at principals at the time. For him it was "*information overload*". The speed with which the professional learning was injected into principal class officers, was "*too much, too quickly*", from Paul's perspective, but he did value network meetings as places where learning was constantly occurring.

Martin's feeling was that principals tend to pick and choose from a range of resources; they will decide what is appropriate for their needs. During those years he was preoccupied with lifting his school's performance and did not engage with many of the principal readings, which he did not find relevant. Martin recalled that he did begin reading a couple of the books but did not continue with them as he found them irrelevant to his day-to-day concerns.

Robert's attitude was similar. He used what he found valuable to his needs. "*I didn't read all the books and I skimmed some*". Martin also expressed some cynicism around the cost of producing such glossy documents, when many schools were struggling to make ends meet. Martin recalls, "*There was a bit of cynicism about that. We thought wow, look at all this money, that's interesting, and some of it was great stuff*". This point is expanded in theme 4f. *Excesses of the system*.

The themes related to the broad heading of Learning that are discussed above, show the complexity of emotions that were expressed related to the Regional Network experience. While principals valued the professional learning opportunities and resources that were provided, the nature and content of the delivery did not resonate with all principals to the same positive level. As previously pointed out by

Martin and Robert, principals chose to take up aspects of professional learning that resonated with them. Robert said that he could ignore what "*I didn't agree with*".

Theme 4. The system

There were several themes that emerged about the system that negatively affected the experiences of principals who felt compromised by lack of consultation or perceived double standards from system leaders. This had a real impact on the day-to-day work of principals in their schools. Policy change led to lack of direction and feelings of uncertainty. Double standards related to perceived lack of transparency and excessive spending also had an unsettling effect on some principals. These emotions are explored in the following themes: *4c. Impacts of policy change*; *4d. Arbitrary nature of decision-making*; *4e. Nepotism and favouritism*; and *4f. Excesses of the system*.

4c. Impacts of policy change. This theme has links with theme *2d. Sense of abandonment and alienation*. All of the principals interviewed for this project expressed levels of disappointment at the premature end of the Regional Networks, when the state government changed in November 2010. With the change in government came a change in policy. Laura saw it as follows:

There has certainly been a change in the way networks operate and that has been largely due to changes in government and the emphasis that different governments have had on the purpose of the network. So if we go back to a few years ago pre-Liberal government I think the networks were still very strong. (Laura)

Jennie, who had previously commented that the Regional Network structure and agenda was a less-satisfactory experience for her as the principal of a Specialist

Development School, spoke about the impossible workload of the Senior Advisors, the regional personnel who were introduced to replace Regional Network Leaders. The new role was completely different and Senior Advisors (SARPPs) had around 60 schools to oversee. Jennie was concerned for the welfare of the Senior Advisors as they were travelling long distances and had so many more schools that they were responsible for.

I used to worry about them because I knew they would always be in the car ringing up, and commuted to Moe {Regional office in a town 2 hours away} or wherever. I thought it was just a ridiculous workload. I don't know how they were expected to do what they wanted to do and they couldn't do what were expected to do because it was just impossible. (Jennie)

Eliza spoke about the fact that membership of the networks now became optional. She did not necessarily see a problem with that, and acknowledged that some principals did leave the network. She regarded that as their right.

The changes that have occurred now are that people can choose to be in the network or they might not be in the network or they can go to another network, and that certainly happened, some people opted to go to another network and I think that is fine too. (Eliza)

However, what Eliza found difficult was the lack of direction from the centre.

We have had a couple of years where there has been less direction or little direction, so people have just been floating along on past things. I think if someone was a new principal it would be really, really hard. So no, I don't think we have had as much direction; we have had a couple of years of little direction. (Eliza)

Robert was very critical of the decision to end Regional Networks. He described it as follows:

The Regional Networks were abolished and the regions became huge, great big things and I guess the change in policy just for change in policy's sake so that our political leaders of the day would not be seen to adopting policy of its opposition. (Robert)

Robert also spoke about the consultative and transparent way the Regional Network had operated. In his view members could always speak up about their concerns and it encouraged sharing across network schools. The level of active participation is a critical component of effective collaboration. (Church et al., 2002; Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2002) Robert doesn't see that happening any more.

People during those three years, and I'm not saying it was paradise, but if people disagreed with something at that time, they knew they had the ability to speak up and people would listen to them. Another advantage to the way we had it set up and I think the other networks were pretty much the same was, it was particularly those first two years, it got staff from this school out and into other schools - there were many more opportunities for that than there are now. (Robert)

Belinda outlined the difficulties faced by the Executive committee after the Regional Networks ended. They were still expected to run the network but without a Regional Network Leader or the resources that they had previously provided by the system.

It's a lot harder for the Executive now. We had a network that had been through some hard times, and a merger, and was doing OK, and when the

Regional Network structure ended, when you could have whatever network you liked, and we spoke to the network about what they wanted and whether they wanted to change, but they wanted to maintain the network the way it was. They were happy with the model. (Belinda)

Laura also found the lack of direction disappointing after the compelling vision that had been embraced by principals across the state through the *Blueprint* policies (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007a). She said, “*There is no Blueprint agenda. Sink or swim on your own. The depletion of resources has been astronomical and the regional level has been decimated*”. Laura also spoke about the impact of the change in the focus of networks since the policy changed and described her feelings of disillusionment.

From my perspective I've lost motivation to go. So I think the fact that we don't have it now, to look back into that period and see a government that had a really clear educational vision, that was backed up by resources at the regional level to then come to network meetings and share those, the vision and to share the documentation that was coming through and generate discussion among the principals, was really, really excellent. (Laura)

Melissa recalled the way in which her network tried to continue with the Regional Network agenda after the policy changed, because that is what the membership wanted.

For a couple of years when there was a change of government and the Regional Network Leader role was abolished, and we maintained, we felt as a network, that we had a lot of bonds, a lot of collegiality, and we decided to stay with the same structure as a network. (Melissa)

Melvin found that the same attitude was true for his network.

Well, I think everybody, for the first 12 months, wanted to keep the status quo. Well, we certainly did because you know we had gone a long way towards sharing network resources. (Melvin)

Sam expressed his dismay about the lack of recognition given by the new government for the work that had been achieved through the Regional Networks. This was done under the guise of giving more independence to principals.

I said, well, I'm just going to focus on my school, that's how I coped with it. Well, we did all this work to develop the network, we felt we were doing a good job, focusing on the things that were important to us and then suddenly it changes again. I suppose it changed twice, and that can tend to deflate you a little bit and also, the sense particularly when the new government came in, they didn't appreciate the system. They said you are all independent, do your own thing if you want to. (Sam)

For Paul the increased independence offered by the new government's approach meant a gain in independence at the expense of a loss of collegiality. The size of networks increased once more and there seemed little time at meetings for interaction with colleagues, *"we don't have the same opportunity for collegiality that we used to have. Network meetings are larger, SARPPs have more responsibilities."* (Paul)

Principals missed the sense of purpose and connection that were features of Regional Network meetings, as members engaged in the various local projects that bound them together and brought a new understanding of each other's schools. Principals saw their involvement in the Regional Networks as connecting them in a

shared moral purpose that they had seen as effective in other international contexts (Fullan, 2003; Hargreaves, 2010; Levin, 2012) through the learning opportunities offered to them. They regretted that those opportunities appeared to have been lost.

When the policy changed and the Regional Networks ended there was no immediate, alternative governance structure introduced to replace it. What had been removed was the Regional Network Leader and the rules around size and membership. Belinda, Eliza, Melvin, and Robert spoke about their members who wanted to maintain the structure as it was. Therefore Executive Committees continued to govern within their own right, but they were also tied to the former structure in that their responsibilities related to the management of Student Support Staff Officers, who had been attached to the Regional Network structure. Although the structure formally ended there were still system-related ties that needed to be managed. Each Regional Network was allocated a team of Student Support Services Officers (SSSOs), such as psychologists and speech pathologists, allocated against their budget. Therefore, there were financial issues to be managed such as the salaries of these staff members, which were included within the network's funds. The Executive Committees of Regional Networks were responsible for the management of SSSOs, with regard to performance management, leave arrangements and employment of new staff members. This fell to the existing Executive Committees, that were given legitimacy and support, through their members' endorsement (Moore & Khagram, 2004) to continue to operate as they had previously done. The new government also needed the Executive Committees to continue managing the Student Services staff, while they worked out what to do. Therefore, endorsement of the Executive's governance capability continued at the system level.

Researcher to Melissa: *So it sounds like you have continued to do all the things that happened before, without the Regional Network Leader, just leading yourselves?*

Melissa: *Yes, that's right.*

Melissa's comment indicated that the Executive continued to carry out all the tasks previously expected of it by both principals and new system leaders. Therefore, the governance arrangements remained largely unchanged with regard to the functions undertaken by the Executive committee. The exception was the absence of the Regional Network Leader.

4d. The arbitrary nature of decision-making. This theme is closely related to theme 2c. *Sense of abandonment and alienation*; and theme 4c. *Impacts of policy change*. There are two levels of comment made by the principals interviewed about this theme. The first level relates to poor decision-making during the time of the Regional Networks and the *Blueprint* agenda (DE&T 2003; DEECD, 2007a). The second level relates to what happened after the Regional Network structure was abandoned with the change in state government. Both levels of comment bring with them some feelings of bitterness and resentment.

Martin and Sam expressed views about lack of transparency and consideration in relation to decisions about moving principals to other Regional Networks, against their will. Martin says, *"I was devastated. All my community was basically in ---- but we were being put into this other network that didn't make sense"*. For Martin's school this led to a breakdown of precious relationships with colleagues from his previous network, and he believes the lack of consultation was

“was one of the downfalls of the structure at that time, there was an element of arbitrariness coming from the region.” He expanded on this by adding,

All of a sudden after this network was going well for a couple of years, and I can go through some of the fantastic work we were doing, the network changed. I felt, quite arbitrarily, we were shunted off into another network.

(Martin)

Sam faced a similar experience of disillusionment when his network was changed. *“It had the effect of sucking the life out of some of the things we were doing and where we were, I suppose having to re-start again”*. When asked how he coped with this decision Sam replied, that he concentrated on his own school. He elaborated,

Well, we did all this work to develop the network, we felt we were doing a good job, focusing on the things that were important to us and then suddenly it changes again. (Sam)

Other comments made by Laura, Melissa, Eliza, Robert, Melvin, Paul and Sam relate to the senselessness and waste inherent in the decision to end the Regional Network structure prematurely. Jennie expressed concern about the workload of the Senior Advisors who have replaced the Regional Network Leaders in a different arrangement with a doubling in the number of schools; this resulted from the restructure of regions. She says, *“I don’t know how they were expected to do what they wanted them to do and they couldn’t do what they expected them to do because it was just impossible”*. Laura commented on the weakened nature of the networks since the Regional Network structure was abandoned. She was angry about the destruction of documents and withdrawal of resources.

The destruction of those documents and the complete, what's the word, abandonment of those documents once the new government came in was one of the greatest tragedies that happened in education. There were Literacy and Numeracy networks, which were good. But now we see really no resources put into our teachers or networks. (Laura)

Laura described the lack of direction coming from the change in government as, *"the blind leading the blind"*. Robert regarded the decision to end Regional Networks to be a myopic and ill-considered action.

The Regional Networks were abolished and the regions became huge, great big things and I guess the change in policy just for change in policy's sake so that our political leaders of the day would not be seen to adopting policy of its opposition. (Robert)

He described the change as *"short-sighted"*. Sam found the new government's lack of respect, for what had been achieved over that period, as deflating. *"When the new government came in, they didn't appreciate the system. They said you are all independent, do your own thing if you want to."* (Sam).

For Sam inconsistent directions of government policy and decisions based on lack of evidence or consultation (from either side of the political spectrum) needed to be replaced with a more respectful view of the status quo. If policy was made on the run with little consideration for the consequences to principals and schools, it has the *"capacity to suck the life out of you in your capacity and willingness to contribute in that way"*. (Sam)

With regard to arbitrary decision-making and his need to protect himself from that after his experience, Martin said,

I am very good at ignoring things from the Department that I think are peripheral to what we need. They do come and that will never stop, because people will get little light-bulb moments, and that's putting it nicely. (Martin)

Martin suggested that the “*little light bulb moments*” were self-seeking exercises emanating from ambitious individuals within the system, with little consideration for the consequences that impacted on schools. This arbitrary nature of decision making that impacted heavily on schools was a hindrance to principals, causing unnecessary disruption to projects and common goals (Hopkins, Munro, et al., 2011) that had been a feature of network interaction.

Martin's choice of words that, “*quite arbitrarily we were shunted off to another network*”, demonstrated his loss of trust in the system in relation to his place in a network. This lack of consideration for his collegial needs and, from Martin's perspective, the lack of consideration for the interests of his school, demonstrated the impersonal nature of aspects of a systems approach not intended to be an outcome of Senge's model (Senge, 2006). In pursuit of alignment and the bigger picture the individual sometimes lost out. For Sam such poor decisions led to his withdrawal from fully engaging with the vision. He withdrew to focus on his school.

In the case of Martin and Sam, whose Regional Networks were restructured for what they considered to be arbitrary reasons, the social capital that had developed as a result of the trusting relationships and collaboration (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) that was already in existence, diminished. Martin never regained that sense of social capital when he was re-assigned to the new network. This decision also affected the potential development of human capital within his staff as the connections they had enjoyed with local schools were disrupted. Professional Capital is realised through the connectedness of social, human and decisional capital. For

Martin and Sam social capital was lost through the change to membership of their networks.

4e. Nepotism or favouritism. Laura, Jennie, Martin and Robert suggested that there was a lack of transparency in the way in which things were managed within the system. There was the hint of an inner sanctum of favourite people, a selected few who had access to special privileges because of their connections. Laura, who had previously said that she had been overlooked by the system because of her outspoken remarks, questioned the way appointments were sometimes made. She strongly expressed the view that there was an “in” group, of which she was not a member.

I still have a small degree of cynicism, even as we go through the IBAC situation [previously explained at the beginning of Chapters 5 and 6] at consultative period, the government had many, many consultative processes. Of course, the chairperson of the network clearly needed to be at the regional and state level, to pass on information; that was great. I think that was fantastic, and they were totally committed to making sure the views of the network were passed through. But it was, very much a boys' network, it has come to light. (Laura)

Laura described the questionable nature of the way some appointments were made.

We have always wondered how people get transferred and moved, so there is a degree of cynicism around the rhetoric and what's expected of principals in their schools and appointments at a regional level. Clearly with IBAC, the jobs for the boys has come to fruition, so that's turned out to be not just a dissatisfaction for me, but quite a reality. (Laura)

Laura felt some vindication when reading transcripts of the IBAC inquiry because she realised that her feelings about Nepotism within the system, irrespective of which government was in power, were correct. In her perception,

People were tapped on the shoulder and people who were seen to be maybe too mouthy were overlooked. We clearly saw the same people being tapped on the shoulder and that was under Darrell Fraser and although it was a visionary period it was also such a boys' network and girls' network. (Laura)

Martin also questioned the merit of some appointments with regard to the Regional Network Leaders.

Sometimes you think: How did that person become a Regional Network Leader? What have they actually achieved in terms of school improvement on the ground working with principals with these incredible challenges. Some are very good at the theory, and that's great, that's necessary, but only half of it. (Martin)

Robert spoke about the way in which the Deputy Secretary came into his position. Previously he had been the principal of a large secondary school in the Southern Metropolitan Region, and several of his senior staff members ended up working alongside him in the central office within the Office for Government School Education, or on the *Ultraset* project (see previous explanation at the beginning of Chapter 5 and 6).

They offered Darrell [Deputy Secretary] the job because they wanted someone who wasn't just focused on administration but actual education, I think the people he got in there, and people criticised him for that, that it was just his former secondary college, in town. (Robert)

Jennie, who was involved in the *Ultraset* trial as a pilot school, also expressed her reservations when recalling the way things were managed, but she could not put her finger on anything specific.

It seemed to be, not secret business going on, but I always, just felt that there was something. Not secret business, that's probably the wrong thing to say. I felt that part of it was transparent and part of it wasn't. I can't really explain why. (Jennie)

In spite of the feelings of unrest regarding the probity of some appointments that were made, the four principals quoted above largely remained engaged with the vision and the system. Their excitement about the educational reforms of the day and their commitment to the bold vision that was presented to them, along with the resources that accompanied that vision, led them largely to overlook or indulge these transgressions, perhaps feeling these were things out of their control.

The theme of *Nepotism and favouritism* illustrates the dangers that occur when a reform agenda is accepted so successfully by an organisation, that the pursuit of its implementation overrides the accountability process in a Machiavellian (Machiavelli & Bondanella, 2005) fashion. The end justifying the means, in the sense of recruitment of personnel and program implementation, was perceived to lack transparency by Jennie, Martin, Robert and Laura. Senge (2006) identifies “Metanoia - A Shift in Mind”, as a key component of change at this level, where “through learning, we re-create ourselves” (Senge, 2006, p. 13). People in the organisation did re-create themselves. This was largely achieved through investment in professional learning programs, to the extent that had not been seen before. Sam called it a “*golden age*”. There was an excitement (see theme 4b) surrounding the changes and policy directions that Laura previously described, as a “*charismatic*

change that enveloped us all"; that there was an acceptance (or at least a tolerance of), the system's flaws.

There are still some people who have been in those jobs forever, are they there because they are brilliant at what they do or just incredibly strong political beings who understand the system and work through it no matter what the political challenge or persuasion of the day is? (Laura)

The sentiments expressed by Laura and Robert show that these principals who were both very experienced, understood that there were flaws in the system which they believed were out of their control. They continued to focus on things they could affect, the quality of learning and teaching within their own schools.

4f. Excesses of the system. The examples given by the principals interviewed demonstrate that they recognised excesses in the behaviour of central leaders, irrespective of their political persuasion. Perceived excesses related, initially, to the way the system's vision was implemented. While principals connected with the vision and were excited by the times, there was criticism of the marketing of the policy. The cost involved in the production of glossy documents drew some reaction from principals struggling to manage their budgets. Martin recalled, "*There was a bit of cynicism about that. We thought, wow, look at all this money, that's interesting.*" Laura spoke about the waste associated with the destruction of system documents, when the government changed.

The destruction of those documents and the complete, what's the word, abandonment of those documents once the new government came in was one of the greatest tragedies that happened in education. (Laura)

Considerable criticism was directed against of the lavishness of the large, state wide principals' forums, the *Big Days Out*. Robert considered them to be, "*a bit of a waste of time*"

However, the greatest criticism by the principals interviewed surrounded the launch of the information technology platform, the *Ultraset*. The *Ultraset* project has been previously explained as well as the fact that questions about the *Ultraset* were not asked during the interview process for this study. Nevertheless, concerns about the management of the *Ultraset* surfaced in 5/10 transcripts.

Belinda's view was, that "*I think they lost sight of the ground. To me when the books and professional reading was happening that was about the work on the ground, but they lost sight of that.*" Therefore, Belinda became critical of what she perceived to be a lack of transparency in the way decisions were made, by key figures leading the system at the time. Belinda described her feeling that things were unravelling, when the *Ultraset* was launched, in such an ostentatious and decadent fashion. Robert, Melissa and Jennie also mentioned the extravagance of the use of an *Ultraset* bus, as a promotional exercise. Robert expressed his misgivings about the launch of the *Ultraset* as follows:

But I think their biggest mistake was with that day they had the Ultraset Launch and all schools were expected to do it on the one day and yet on that day we were expected to be in town at the Big Day Out, instead of being here with our staff. It was a good concept; it just didn't work. (Robert)

Jennie recalled that day as a professional low point for the system. She was in the audience during the *Ultraset* Launch.

I remember the time they had the bus, I remember sitting in the audience and thinking, I hope there are no international photographers here. I was

absolutely, professionally embarrassed. I remember my sister, who had just become an assistant principal at the time, and that's when assistant principals had also been invited, and she was there. And at the end of the day, I said, "What did you think?" And she said: "OH MY GOD!" (Jennie)

Jennie described what she regarded as the sheer excessiveness and vulgarity of the experience.

I thought everything about it was ridiculous, the amount of people in the room at the time, the money it would have cost and when the Regional Directors got out of the bus with their placards, and the dancing girls. And the sparkly suits, I was so professionally embarrassed. I thought: Is this a circus? Is this a circus? (Jennie)

The principals who expressed an opinion on the *Ultraset* launch were very critical in their comments as can be seen, particularly, by Jennie's animated remarks. The *Ultraset* launch represented a breakdown in trust for the principals involved. They perceived that the system had lost control of the school improvement agenda. They were swept along in the wake of expectation that they would implement an initiative for which their schools lacked both the resources and infrastructure. They knew that they did not have the capacity to deliver the vision that was put forward. Yet the Regional Networks were expected to advance the implementation of the *Ultraset* at their local level. An *Ultraset* coach was attached to each Regional Network to facilitate professional learning related to the implementation of the *Ultraset* in each school. While principals regarded the leadership style of central leaders as "visionary" (Goleman, 2000) for the most part, "in the ability to take charge and inspire with a compelling vision", with regard to the lack of transparency

that was observed in some aspects of the implementation of that vision, the style became “coercive” (Goleman, 2000) in its demands for compliance.

The leaders of the system at that time worked largely on the assumption that, “Building Shared Vision” (Senge, 2006, p. 9) was the critical component to the success of the reform agenda. Senge warns, that, “All too often, a company’s shared vision has revolved around the charisma of a leader, or around a crisis that galvanises everyone temporarily” (p. 9). This was true, to some extent, in this case. The charisma and flamboyant style of the leader did engage principals (Goleman, 2000). The novelty of the theatrical approach to policy launch and *Big Days Out* did have a mystical quality that principals embraced and were initially intrigued by (see theme 4b. *Excitement about that time of educational reform*).

The excesses of the system, as seen by the actions of the Deputy Secretary as he enacted the big picture of his vision through events such as the *Big Days Out*, and other various presentations involving flamboyance and gifts, ultimately diminished the perception of his decisional capital, his exercise of judgement. Robert explained it this way, “*He [Deputy Secretary] later did some pretty dumb things but still obviously the things he did, we hadn’t done before*”. He saw some of the behaviours as ill-advised but acknowledged that the Deputy Secretary was breaking new ground. The Deputy Secretary, in attempting to break that new ground, appeared to follow Hargreaves and Fullan’s mantra to simultaneously push and pull your peers. “Creating a revolution in Professional Capital is going to take some pushing and pulling” (2012, p. 158). The extravagant approach taken during *Big Days Out* did challenge principals and often inspired them. However, there was an emerging sense that things were going too far. Belinda had this sense when she spoke about things “*unravelling*”. That was certainly the case with regard to the Ultranet Launch

(previously described and particularly borne out by Jennie's comments) and other perceived excesses of the system during that period.

The lens of Theoretical Frameworks

Three theoretical frameworks previously referred to in the literature review are now applied to the thematic analysis to enrich the discussion and anchor it in theory. These frameworks are Systems Thinking (Senge, 2006); Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012); and Governance (Moore & Khagram, 2004).

Senge's lens of Systems Thinking (2006) added insights into the analysis of themes related to *The system*, with regard to generating and implementing a shared vision. A restructure of principals' groups into Regional Networks was the system's response to managing change through the promotion of team learning within the new structure. Central policy leaders based their decisions on international research (Fullan, 2000; Leadbeater et al., 2005; Levin, 2012) and determined that schools should be grouped into networks of around 25 schools led by a Regional Network Leader. The RNL would coordinate and lead team development and capacity-building activities, through strategic intent and action. The rationale for the structure was about the common good, not the individual (Fullan, 2003; Hopkins, 2007) and the Regional Network structure recognised the institutional value of team development (Senge, 2006) as an essential component of the improvement of the whole.

A Systems Thinking (2006) lens is also relevant to the examination of themes related to *Learning* as professional learning was the basis for changing the culture of the system. The first discipline, in Senge's framework (2006), is *Building Shared Vision*. This was the starting point for the rollout of the *Blueprint* policies (DE&T,

2003; DEECD, 2007a). The strong focus on teaching and learning was identified by all principals and they understood the vision and perceived it to be clearly visible in the range of programs, strategies and resources which defined the period. For Senge (2006), a shared vision required a genuine commitment and belief in the picture that was presented; it could not be dictated. Strategies that fostered the building of a shared vision included a plethora of system documents and frameworks that articulated the vision. This vision presented a model for effective schools, and a leadership framework that promoted a common language. Examples of system-generated documents that were highly regarded by the principals interviewed included the *Effective Schools Model* (Sammons et al., 1995); Sergiovanni's leadership capabilities as presented in the *Developmental Framework for School Leaders* (DEECD, 2007b); and the *E5* framework (DEECD, 2009a). These were all key documents that reinforced the Department of Education's vision to rebuild the capacity of the system.

Within Senge's framework (2006) from the individual discipline of *Personal Mastery* (2006, p. 9) needs to follow the collective influence of the system's vision and requires the continual clarification and refinement of the vision, at a personal level. In a practical sense this meant: How did the vision translate to a principal's own school and its unique circumstances? *Personal Mastery* is about an organisation investing in its workforce by building skills at the individual level. The promotion of this discipline could be seen in the broad range of professional learning opportunities available not only to principals, but to their teachers. *Team Learning*, the next discipline that Senge identifies as an essential component of Systems Thinking, was a key component of the reform agenda that had at its core the Regional Network structure. Senge's framework (2006) is particularly relevant in the context of team

building. He distinguishes team learning as a very specific form of learning that allows for rigorous exchange of ideas in a respectful and supportive environment. Senge (2006) advocates that unless teams can learn, organisations cannot learn. Thus learning exchange was the essential component of capacity-building in Regional Networks.

Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) forms a complementary lens with that of Systems Thinking, when considering the themes related to *Learning*. However the Professional Capital focus is on the people, rather than the vision. It specifically looks at the capacity of the professionals within the system and how their development can be mobilised to enrich the system. Promotion of professional learning is an essential ingredient of investment in individuals. The end result is an enhanced workforce and a growth in the resource of human capital. Within the three components that make up the concept of Professional Capital, professional learning, through the development of enhanced skills, also leads to more confident decision-making and increased levels of decisional capital. An example of this was Martin's emphasis on data analysis, which was one aspect of professional learning within the Regional Network structure that led to greater evidence-based decision-making, in teachers and school leaders. As the system highlighted the importance of team learning as a vehicle for moving the vision forward, social capital was created within the Regional Network structure through the synergy of principals working together on common goals.

The term *capital*, which is usually connected with adding value to net worth, or making an investment for a return, is not something that educational leaders would immediately be drawn to in describing their field of expertise. Nevertheless, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) have used this term to link it with the building of net

worth and adding value within education systems. They identify three forms of capital that make up the umbrella concept of Professional Capital. These are human capital (individual skill and talent); social capital (the collective power of the group); and decisional capital (the expert knowledge and experience developed over many years that leads to the most appropriate judgments about what learners need). A Professional Capital approach to educational improvement recognises that the expertise of teachers individually and collectively make a difference to student learning and achievement. Collective capacity and expertise are built through investment by the system in both personnel and programs.

Applying the Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) lens to Regional Networks, principals who were uprooted from their established relationships, such as Martin and Sam, experienced a loss of social capital by the fact that their relationships with former colleagues were disrupted. This disruption also impacted on their schools. In Martin's case secondary school working groups that collaborated on transition processes, enrolment boundaries and curriculum development were affected. Once that connection was formally severed by the restructure it was very difficult for Martin and his staff to continue the work with his former network's schools. Therefore, it can be said, that the loss of valuable knowledge exchange that was a feature of those working parties, impacted on the further development of his teachers, thereby affecting the school's resource from a human capital perspective. Within newly merged groups, where two cultures were very different, there was also a loss of social capital. This took several years to rebuild. This was particularly the case where there were feelings of strong resentment by members of the merged groups. As Jennie recalled, *"They weren't happy about it and they didn't want to do it"*.

The harmonious relationship between the elements that make up the strategic triangle of governance (Moore & Khagram, 2004, p.2), as it operated within the Regional Networks, are the alignment of “public value”, “operational capability” and “legitimacy and support”. These provided an environment that fostered professional learning through the actions of the Executive committee in partnership with the Regional Network Leader. The Executive encouraged team learning through its working parties and its role of advocacy for principals. Eliza also spoke about the fact that the Executive promoted the professional learning programs available through the centre within the network agenda and that network meetings were a conduit for the delivery of professional learning sessions.

Moore and Khagram's (2004, p.2) governance lens is useful in considering how the components of their strategic triangle (public value; operational capability; allegiance and support) impacted on the operations and mandate for decision-making within the Regional Network context. In this case the stakeholders were the principals, their schools and their communities. By supporting and endorsing the role of the Executive and its functions the principals in the network gave the management structure its public value and operational capability. While operational capability and public value were also attributed by the system through its facilitation of the Executive structure and by its official recognition of it, the true endorsement of the influence of the Executive came from principals. Member principals, through their endorsement and support of the network, authorised the environment of the Executive. The legitimacy of the network came through the support of the membership in tandem with recognition and endorsement by the system. Through members' affirmation of the network's governance structure and their enthusiastic participation in it, principals gave the structure its public value. Public value was

reflected in their participation in network initiatives and projects, which in turn, benefited individual principals, their teachers and their communities through the knowledge creation and shared resources that benefit member schools. However, in the situation described by Jennie which follows, she encountered the hostility of principal members who were unhappy with the introduction of the Regional Network structure. Those principals could not see public value in the new network structure and clearly did not give it their allegiance and support. This, in turn, impeded the operational capability of the Executive committee of Jennie's Regional Network in the early months of its formation.

I remember we had a forum, and I was trying to facilitate the discussion. I can't even remember what the discussion was about and I am by nature, consultative, and I began by asking them, I think I gave them a couple of options about how we could go about the work we were going to do, and one of these particular principals told me basically: I am not interested in the bloody consultation, just tell us what we have to do, and I found that really quite (pause) because that is not how I work. I found the resistance difficult, absolutely. (Jennie)

Jennie's very vivid account of the resentment she faced as a member of the Executive at the hands of principals who were unsupportive of the mandated merge of their previous network to form the new Regional Network, illustrates the levels of anger and frustration that existed for some principals who riled against the change. It is surprising that such levels of animosity were blatantly displayed with little consideration for the most basic level of expectations of professional behaviour at the principal class level, which would not have been tolerated in any other forum.

In applying the strategic triangle framework of Moore and Khagram (2004) to Executive Committees, it can be said that the Executive sought the allegiance of their members for the Regional Networks to operate effectively. Members/stakeholders needed to recognise the value in the operational side of the network before they gave it their support. In the case such as Jennie's situation, where allegiance and support were not strong, the authorising environment became less effective because the operational capabilities of the network were not supported.

The system's imposition of the new network structure highlighted the limitations of the governance structure's lack of independence in the *Network Accountability Framework* (DEECD, 2010). Although having some level of autonomy with regard to its operations, the Regional Network was owned and created by the system. Executive committees could not influence the decision to implement a mandated membership structure but they were required to make it work.

Therefore the mandated membership of Regional Networks presented some strong challenges for Executive committees as, at times, they were dealing with the resentment and anger of principals. These principals, who had been forced into a re-structure and were suspicious of it, were not always cooperative, as Jennie has described in her experience as a member of her Executive.

Synthesis of Thematic Analysis

Within the two chapters devoted to the thematic analysis which are categorised by the elements of the Regional Network structure that either helped or hindered principals in their work, themes have been analysed under the headings of *Regional Network Operations; Relationships; Learning; and The system*. These headings and the themes they generated are interconnected and represent the range of

perceptions of the experiences of 10 principals who were members of five different Regional Networks.

The thematic discussion was further scrutinised through the overlay of three theoretical frameworks; Systems Thinking (Senge, 2006), Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) and Governance (Moore & Khagram, 2004) anchoring the themes within the context of educational reform theory and purpose.

The themes presented under the heading of the *Regional Network Operations*, related to the role of the network leader; the governance of the network; its projects and initiatives. Under the heading of *Relationships*, the themes of collegiality; emotions around feelings of affirmation and alienation; and self-forming networks, were examined. Themes categorised under the heading of *Learning* related to the range of professional learning opportunities, their relevance and how they were facilitated through both the Regional Networks and the system. The fourth category, *The system*, produced themes connected with the education reform agenda and its implementation. This theme included principals' perceptions of their role within the system as well as observations of a lack of transparency in aspects of the implementation of reforms related to recruitment and excesses in the promotion of the agenda.

The following points provide a synthesis of the ideas generated through the analysis of the themes in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 to provide a picture of what aspects of the membership of Regional Networks helped or hindered principals in their work.

All principals interviewed for this study placed a high value on collegiality. They valued collaboration and the opportunities to share knowledge through professional interactions. Meeting regularly in system-organised collaborative

groups was supportive of the principal role and enhanced individual professional capacity. Through collaboration, agreed protocols reinforced relationships and cooperative practices. Protocols developed through membership of a Regional Network had a moderating influence on the behaviours of individual principals with regard to local district issues such as the enforcement of enrolment boundaries. Through collaboration principals fostered a sense of collective responsibility for the learning of students within their district. When that worked well principals enjoyed and learnt from working on group projects and visiting each other's schools. However, while eight principals spoke only positively about learning and collaboration within the Regional Network structure, two principals commented on the lack of relevance of some collaborative projects depending on their own school's priorities.

All the principals valued being involved in the decision-making and governance of system-organised collaborative groups, through an Executive Committee structure. The governance structure that was in place for the Regional Networks was regarded as fair and representative.

All principals valued the existence of a designated system leader to coordinate a collaborative group and act as a conduit for policy directions from the centre as it reduced principals' workloads within collaborative groups. However, three principals commented on the lack of effectiveness of the RNL. Effectiveness depended on skills and expertise in relation to an RNL's understanding of each school's local context. Principals valued longevity of tenure of the system leader attached to their group. Longevity of tenure added stability, capitalised on relationships and the existing knowledge of the local context. This was particularly helpful for the support of less experienced principals. In situations where system

leaders changed, as was the case for two principals, there was a disruptive influence on the Regional Network.

All principals were respectful and supportive of their system leaders and understood their specific role. Principals particularly valued localised support through regional office staff.

All principals saw themselves as part of a system and, as such, appreciated guidance and direction from the system through the delivery of a definitive vision. Nine out of the ten principals valued the support provided by system-generated resources, whether that be policy and curriculum documents or data sets that assisted them to make evidence-based decisions about learning needs. However, excessive documentation demanded of them by the system such as the development of a network strategic plan was generally seen to be a waste of time. This view was expressed by all of the principals who participated in this study.

Five principals spoke about being valued and receiving affirmation from the system. When this was absent feelings of alienation and abandonment could follow.

Five principals commented that clear and fair processes as part of the system's operations were not always evident. There was not a perceived transparency of process with regard to all practices of the system.

Only two principals spoke about mandated membership of Regional Networks as having a negative influence on them personally; however four principals who were not personally affected in relation to their own schools spoke about the difficulties caused by merged networks where mandated membership resulted in tensions as a result of different cultures being forced together. Those principals who were not negatively impacted; that is eight out of the ten principals,

did not see mandated membership as a problem because they accepted the centre's view that Regional Networks should be of a uniform size.

Regional Networks did not satisfy all the professional needs of its principal members. All the principals interviewed for this study accessed a range of self-chosen networks, in conjunction with their Regional Network membership, that specifically addressed their needs. Self-chosen networks, in some cases, took precedence over the system-organised groups. However, all principals saw value and necessity in the co-existence of such groups.

Seven of the ten principals interviewed commented on the impact of changes in policy. Change in policy for change's sake, or for political clout, was resented by principals and hindered their work. Frequent changes to the structure of system-organised groups made it difficult to consolidate relationships and initiate or continue with common projects.

All principals expressed a strong sense of autonomy in their roles, while maintaining a strong connection to the system. However, three principals commented that if they regarded that the centre made unreasonable demands of them they would find a way around it, within the guidelines, and do what was best for their own school.

The synthesis outlined above completes the chapters devoted to the thematic analysis of participant's transcripts and identifies aspects of the Regional Network structure that helped or hindered principals in their role. Table 5, which follows, shows the frequency of the occurrence of themes within all principal transcripts. An asterisk indicates the reference to a theme within a transcript. Where there is a space this indicates that the principal who was interviewed did not mention the theme. Table 5 is important because it shows the broad range of themes covered by each

principal during the interview process. It also shows which themes were not mentioned by individual principals. In providing a quick summary of the themes and the principals who mentioned them, Table 5 also shows which issues were predominant in the minds of individual principals when speaking about their perceptions of the Regional Network experience.

Table 5

Themes Within Transcripts

Themes	Belinda	Eliza	Jennie	Laura	Martin	Melissa	Melvin	Paul	Robert	Sam
The RNL role	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Network Executive	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Network projects	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Mandated membership	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Collegiality	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Self-forming networks	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*
Support, recognition and affirmation	*		*	*	*			*		*
Sense of abandonment	*			*	*		*	*	*	
Professional Learning	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Opportunities arising out of Regional Networks	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
System documents	*	*	*	*	*	*	*			*
Systems thinking, alignment	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Feelings of excitement	*	*		*	*	*	*		*	*
Impacts of policy change	*	*		*	*	*			*	*
Arbitrary decision making									*	*
Excesses of the system	*		*	*	*				*	
Nepotism and favouritism			*	*	*				*	

Note: * = Themes mentioned by principals during interviews.

Chapter 8. Contributions to New Knowledge

We were on the edge of something special that had not been done before in our system. (Martin, research participant)

Summary of this Project

This study explored ten principals' lived experiences of being a member of a Regional Network in an effort to seek answers as to what aspects of this structure helped or hindered principals in their work. Regional Networks, formed in October 2008, as a key initiative to improve educational outcomes in Victorian government schools, were an attempt at system-wide school improvement that formed part of the suite of strategies introduced by the Victorian Labor government between 2003 and 2008. They were system-organised groups of around 25 schools led by a Regional Network Leader and the intent of the Regional Network structure was to build the capacity of principals and schools within a local district. By fostering collective responsibility for students in a district through collaborative practices and professional learning, it was believed that student outcomes would improve. However, the Regional Network structure lasted for only three years; it was discontinued following a change of government.

The goals in undertaking this study were:

- a) to research the phenomenon of Regional Networks as a system-wide school improvement strategy
- b) to collect and analyse the experiences and perceptions of members of Regional Networks
- c) to gain insights into ways in which this structure helped or hindered principals in their work

The literature. An interrogation of the literature revealed the complexity of the terminology that surrounds the broad range of organisational networks and their features. By outlining different types of organisational networks, their historical origins and features, an understanding of the complexity of the terminology related to networks and the range of networks into which the sub-group of *Regional Networks* must fit, was determined.

When considering organisational networks in the corporate and international arena, the literature revealed a complex range of collaborations, alliances and partnerships, which served the purpose of mutually benefiting its members and which fitted the continuum of the definition of a network. Irrespective of the network type, the important link of connection fuelled by relationships was integral to all networks (Church et al., 2002; Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Jarillo, 1988; Kostova & Roth, 2003). The organisational networks examined ranged from corporate to not-for-profit entities. After detailing the nature of Corporate and Inter-organisational Networks and moving to discuss the nature of International Networks the literature review focused on Education Networks as a specific category. It was argued that Education Networks are distinct because of the goals and collective moral purpose on which they are based. Relationships and interactions within Education Networks are not primarily for personal, social or economic advantage. Education Networks ultimately all have the same goal of improving educational opportunities for students.

The discussion of the work of network theorists and inclusion of a table showing the developmental aspect to networks (Hopkins, 2008) demonstrated the potential impact that high levels of collaboration in networks achieve. The identification of the essential features of successful Education Networks were

summarised as: knowledge creation, and transfer; consistency of values and focus; clarity of structure; voluntary membership; agency through a shared commitment to action; dispersed leadership and empowerment, shared resources. The inclusion of specific examples of effective Education Networks showed that these networks displayed features which matched those listed above. The term *effective* in the sense meant that these Education Networks were successful in achieving their goals. The features of effective Education Networks that were listed above are acknowledged to exist in a wide range of Education Networks, both large and small.

By working together schools in a network can enhance the improvement potential of each school (Hopkins, 1990; Hopkins & Ainscow, 1993; Hopkins & Harris, 1997; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001). Hopkins identified collaboration; building capacity and support; focus and purpose; shared leadership; accountability; relationships; and enquiry, as the key elements of Education Networks. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) emphasise that for system-organised groups of schools to be effective as agents of educational change, they need consistency of values and focus; clarity of structure; knowledge creation, utilisation and transfer; rewards related to membership (such as knowledge-sharing); dispersed leadership and empowerment; and adequate resources. Education Networks require a structure that will facilitate school-to-school collaboration so that interactions between schools are regular and purposeful. Chapman and Hadfield (2010) explain this feature of agency and purpose in Education Networks as a shared commitment and collective action. Another essential point about effective Education Networks is that their membership should not be mandated (Hopkins, 2008; Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2002).

The over-arching concepts of Systems Thinking (Senge, 2006); Social Capital (Burt, 1992, 2000; Coleman, 1990; Bourdieu, 1986.); and Governance (Ball,

2008; Haveri, 2006; Osborne, 2007; Rhodes, 1994, 1996, 2007; Torfing & Sorensen, 2012) were introduced as essential concepts to understanding network structures. Through these theoretical frameworks the context for understanding the importance of trust and relationships, as the connecting thread for the interactions of organisational networks, was examined.

When specifically referring to Education Networks, these theoretical frameworks were modified. The framework of Social Capital (Burt, 2000; Coleman, 1988) was expanded within the lens of Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) which includes social capital as an essential component but also adds the categories of human and decisional capital to the framework. This theoretical framework is considered a more appropriate lens to use for Education Networks because it encompasses the role of professional learning as an essential feature.

When considering the role of governance in Education Networks, and specifically the governance of Regional Networks, the work of Moore and Khagram (2004) was the theoretical reference point. This framework was chosen because it considers the concept of public value as a legitimising aspect for operation. Stakeholders need to see value in the work of public organisations if they are to give their support to the work at hand.

Examination of the literature revealed little research into the Regional Network structure. Three studies touched on the structure, but did so only within a broader view of leadership in Victorian schools (Butler, 2014; Griffin et al., 2010; Hopkins et al., 2011). Justification for this study rested on the fact that previous studies had not specifically focused on Regional Networks or taken a phenomenological-type approach to consider principals' experiences of the Regional Network structure. It was believed that insights into principals' lived experience of

the Regional Network structure could inform other models of system-wide reform and provide avenues for further research.

Summary of the research process. This study is has a basis in phenomenology but is not strictly a phenomenological study as it also draws on other constructivist approaches, although it draws heavily on van Manen's thematic analysis guidelines (van Manen, 1997, 2014). It explored 10 principals' experiences of Regional Networks. Principals interviewed for this study were drawn from five of the nine, originally constituted Regional Networks that existed in the Southern Metropolitan Region of Victoria. The 10 principals were taken from primary, secondary and specialist school settings. In this way the diversity of principalship within a Regional Network was represented.

The following research questions were posed:

1. How did members of the Regional Network perceive the experience?
2. In what ways did membership of Regional Networks help or hinder principals in their work?

Within a phenomenologically-inclined research design, each participant's experience is considered unique. The researcher must listen carefully and allow the personal stories to reveal themselves. Many subsequent readings of the transcripts provided opportunities for the researcher to look for recurrent themes that emerged across the narratives. Initially the researcher transcribed the recorded interviews, carefully listening to each lived experience. After re-reading the transcripts several times, the researcher recreated each participant's story, which became the essence of each participant's experience. Each experience and story stood alone as a record of that experience. These stories were included in Chapter 4. As a former Regional Network Leader, the researcher's experience was also represented as a lived

experience which was included in Chapter 1 after setting out the context for the Regional Network structure. The purpose for including the researcher's story was to add an insider (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) perspective of Regional Networks to be considered alongside the participants' perspectives.

It was only after transcripts were scrutinised at the word, sentence and paragraph level that the researcher considered the emergent themes. Themes emerged after multiple readings of transcripts. Emergent themes related to leadership; knowledge-sharing; network governance; collegiality; and system thinking. The themes that emerged extended beyond the immediacy of Regional Network structure to broader aspects of the system. This was not surprising as the Regional Network structure was a product of the system.

Themes were colour-coded and subsequently transferred to tables. Individual participant tables contained extracts referring to all themes that were revealed in each individual transcript. Next, the researcher compiled combined participant tables for each theme, with the relevant extracts from the original transcripts included under theme headings. This allowed for both the efficient location of individual extracts on any theme as well as the documentation of the number of participants who commented on a particular theme. This process proved very helpful in providing the evidence for the thematic discussion outlined in previous chapters. A record of each step in the data analysis process was recorded and constantly updated in the researcher's electronic journal.

In a phenomenological-inclined study such as this, participants were considered as co-researchers, therefore, the researcher sent transcripts, stories and individual participant's thematic analysis tables to all participants for verification. Participants verified transcripts, stories and thematic analysis tables. Therefore

member-checking of transcripts assured the trustworthiness of the data. The process of analysis fell into three areas. First, the reconstruction of individual stories contained in Chapter 4; second, the analysis of three extended extracts that revealed the mixed feelings experienced about Regional Networks presented in Chapter 5 and third, the thematic analysis of how membership of Regional Networks helped or hindered principals in their work. This was presented in Chapters 6 and 7.

The process for determination of themes began as follows. After scrutinising the participants' transcripts at the paragraph, sentence and word level, an initial list of 24 themes collapsed into 19 themes. These themes clustered under the headings of Regional Network Operations; Relationships; Learning; and The system. As a further measure in the process of analysis, three frameworks were applied as an overlay lens to anchor the analysis to theory. These frameworks, which were initially discussed in the literature review, are Systems Thinking (Senge, 2006); Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012); and Governance (Moore & Khagram, 2004).

Responding to the Research Questions

How did members of the Regional Network perceive the experience?

Rationale for Regional Networks. The principals interviewed in this study held a clear understanding of the purpose and context for the Regional Networks as a vehicle for driving the school improvement agenda and responded positively to the structure. They valued the Regional Network Leader role because it connected them to the system more directly and they appreciated having a supportive intermediary who could advise them about issues that affected their schools and their roles. Principals saw an advantage in the size of the Regional Network structure that

allowed more direct contact with their line manager. However, that connection and support, although valued by all the principals interviewed, was perceived to be more important for less-experienced principals who needed more guidance in the early years of principalship.

The RNL as conduit and facilitator. Principals interviewed for this study regarded the Regional Network Leader role to be that of a facilitator and conduit for the system, rather than a leader. They clearly understood that an important part of that role was directed towards generating understanding and compliance of government policies. Even though the role was determined to be a leadership one by the central office of the department it was not necessarily seen as such by the principals. Principals' perceptions of the effectiveness of the RNL role beyond that of a conduit for communications from the centre, depended on the leadership qualities of the individual Regional Network Leader. This point supports the findings of Griffin et al. (2010) even though the initially planned longitudinal study into Regional Networks did not continue and their data was later presented in the form of a report after the changes in government policy. In cases where networks were re-organised mid-stream, the comparison between the effectiveness of leadership within those roles was clearly distinguished from what had gone before.

Principals valued the Regional Network Leader as an important conduit and support mechanism, even if their specific network leader was not perceived to be particularly effective or inspiring. Principals, in addition, understood and respected the various facets of the Regional Network Leader role and were able to compartmentalise them. They were able to separate out the components of line manager and network coordinator and did not personally see the Regional Network Leader role as a conflicted one. However principals knew of colleagues who did not

share this view. The participating principals had a strong sense of their own autonomy and independence (within the context of being a school leader within a system) and did not feel that this autonomy was compromised by the Regional Network Leader role. They compared the role to their own role as principal in school.

Principals recognised that the Regional Network Leader role was instrumental in facilitating the system's requirement of building the skills and capacity of its principals and, within the context of the network structure, the reform agenda was replicated and advanced. The individual talents and skills of network members were developed through involvement in programs and initiatives generated by the network and coordinated by the Regional Network Leader.

Collaboration and trust. The principals involved in this study perceived that high levels of collaboration and trust existed within the Regional Network structure. Collaboration and trust were fostered through working on common goals, which led to both an increase in the professional growth of principals, and their interactions with other network members. Relationships were consolidated through involvement in working parties and group projects. The principals found value in the collaboration and knowledge sharing that occurred within the Regional Network structure. They were all able to speak of involvement in working parties and the professional satisfaction they gained from such a connection. They were able to join interest groups that specifically addressed school issues and improved curriculum knowledge.

Networks initiated many projects to enhance principals' skills as educational leaders; however, principals valued participation in such projects only if they found them relevant and transferable to their own setting. The specialist school principal

involved in this study was less engaged with network projects and found the emphasis on mainstream schools' needs and standardised test data to be irrelevant to the specialist school context. This point also concurs with the findings of Griffin et al. (2010) previously mentioned. A focus on sharing data became an important element of Regional Network activities. However, principals whose schools were not mainstream, or were not within the network leader's range of expertise (a Regional Network Leader from a primary background may not have expertise in secondary schools) did not feel that the Regional Network catered to their needs adequately. While the Regional Network Leader was supportive, the lack of a deep understanding of individual school contexts sometimes rendered the support that was given as well-meaning but superficial. For this reason, Griffin et al. (2010) advocate membership of a variety of networks.

Governance. All the principals interviewed regarded their experience of the Executive committee and governance structure of the Regional Network as fair and representative of their interests because of the rotational nature and accessibility of its membership structure. It was not difficult to access membership on the Executive if one wanted it and there were also other opportunities to contribute and lead groups within the network, if that was what one preferred to do. Principals were respectful of the work that the Executive was involved in and endorsed it with their support. While they understood that the structure was driven from the centre, they regarded the working relationship with the Regional Network Leader, who brought the centre's policy perspective, as a necessary partnership. The Executive played an active role in prioritising and clarifying expectations and directives from the centre. The principals respected their peers who were on the Executive, in the knowledge that they were advocates for them and their schools. However, the rotational aspect

of that Executive's membership was not as transparent in all networks and this also reiterated the point previously made that the qualities and skills of Regional Network Leaders varied from network to network. Some principals' experiences were more positive than others.

Collegiality and moral purpose. All the principals valued relationships and collegiality as an essential component of the Regional Network structure. However, collegiality was not confined to this new structure; it had also existed as an integral part of previous collaborative groups. Because of the centrally controlled Regional Network structure, there was a perception that there was less time for collegiality. In spite of this the satisfaction of working together on joint projects with member principals consolidated new strong relationships. Within the Regional Network structure there was a greater level of data sharing because of the need to develop the strategic directions of the network; principals commented that the sharing of data could not have been possible without the existence of trustful relationships. Relationships were fuelled through the Regional Networks' *raison d'être*, which was to improve student outcomes across a district by fostering a collective, moral purpose. Relationships within Regional Networks were perceived to modify the behaviour of principals, as protocols for such things as enrolment boundaries were agreed upon. Principals would not risk breaking the protocol for fear that it would mar the positive relationships that had been cultivated as a result of collaborative practices. Collaboration was seen to enhance the collective moral purpose of principals to act ethically, according to agreed rules in order to meet the needs of all students in their district.

Role of self-chosen networks. Although Regional Networks were a system-allocated group in which principals met for the purpose of system-wide school

improvement, if that arrangement did not satisfy their specific needs all the principals involved in this study did not hesitate to join other groups that they selected for themselves. In this sense the self-chosen networks that principals independently selected, fit the true definition and demonstrated the features of networks, outlined in the literature review. True networks do not have mandated memberships. While principals indicated that they valued and appreciated the collegiality generated from the Regional Networks, most principals interviewed mentioned that they sought out membership of other groups to fill a specific need. Self-forming networks played an important role in satisfying the individual professional needs of principals. These networks were very important to principals and membership co-existed alongside the Regional Network membership. However, the perspective of system leaders was that the Regional Networks should take precedence and there was an expectation that principals attended these meetings as a priority and network participation was included as a component in principals' performance plans.

Over the period of Regional Networks, principals experienced wide-scale system change in order to achieve the goal of alignment. Generally principals accepted this approach positively, as they appreciated the clarity that came with alignment. However, principals also acknowledged that the implementation of the reform agenda was a broad-brush approach that did not take into account all of an individual principal's needs. This is where self-chosen networks played an important role.

Network size. An advantage of the Regional Network structure was its size, which was conducive to team learning. It allowed for the application and discussion of policy, and translation of the reform vision, to the practical, local level. The team

approach within a localised area such as a Regional Network focused on common goals and the delivery of targeted professional learning that was context-specific. All the principals interviewed mentioned the fact that the network was a vehicle for professional dialogue and sharing. This culture was facilitated by the size of the Regional Networks. Network discussions focused on how teaching and learning could be improved. This translated to a range of network projects and working parties that would foster knowledge-exchange and build trust. A new culture evolved; it changed to one of professional discussion.

Learning. All the principals acknowledged the vast expanse of professional learning that was offered to them over the period that the Regional Networks existed. Professional learning took on a special focus and principals were positive about the levels and variety of professional learning opportunities available at the time. Usually these were facilitated through the Regional Networks. However, the networks also generated their own professional learning agenda based on direction from the centre. Principals spoke in glowing terms about the opportunities for learning, and the way those experiences changed them as leaders. Nevertheless, this was not necessarily the case for all principals and their engagement with the professional learning depended on their perceptions of its relevance to their own personal needs.

Resources. A large component of building the collective vision for educational reform was enacted through the distribution of policy documents and resources, which were produced as high quality publications. The symbolic message delivered to principals through those publications was that the messages they contained were very important and that they were worthy of this high level of investment. The gifting of books and the reading of set texts reinforced the message

of lifelong learning. However, in discussing their levels of engagement with such documents, principals varied in their uptake according to how relevant they perceived the documents to be. The documents that specifically related to teaching, learning and leadership development were most highly valued. Principals took up only what they found valuable to their needs.

The system. All the principals interviewed for this project expressed a strong commitment to the system, even though they may have been critical of aspects of it. They found support and comfort in direction from the centre, which they regarded as affirmation that they were not alone. Loyalty to the system remained very strong in all cases. The principals had a strong understanding of the part they played in the system and their interdependence and inter-connection with it. Although their schools may have been different, they understood their relational role within the system. They maintained loyalty to the system even though there was a perception that this was not always reciprocated. Principals demonstrated good will towards the system and loyally clung to the ideals espoused through the reform agenda.

Most principals (8/10), expressed excitement about this period as a time of unique vision, opportunity and reform. Part of this excitement was generated by the investment by the system in the high quality resources and professional learning opportunities. The principals who did speak about their excitement of this period were effusive and nostalgic about their comments and all of the principals interviewed for this project expressed levels of disappointment at the premature end of the Regional Networks. This structure was targeted when the state government changed in November 2010.

In What Ways Did Membership Help or Hinder Their Work?

Table 6 provides a summary of aspects of Regional Network membership that helped or hindered principals in their work. It is a condensed version of Tables 2 and 3 previously seen in Chapter 6, and Table 4 that was presented in Chapter 7.

Table 6

Summary of What Helped and Hindered Principals

Help	Hindrance
Fostering relationships.	Unnecessary accountability requirements
Opportunities for learning and knowledge sharing.	Mandated membership
Clear educational vision	Lack of recognition of principals' contributions
RNL as a conduit and support person kept the connection to the centre strong.	Arbitrary decision making and sudden policy changes
Fair and shared governance	Limited knowledge of some RNLs about diverse school settings within the network.
High quality resources	Lack of Transparency
Network size	Excesses of the system and unrealistic expectations

Principals generally perceived their experience as a member of a Regional Network to be positive but there was a range of feelings, sometimes contradictory, which was articulated in relation to various aspects of their membership. The effectiveness of the Regional Network structure rested in its ability to foster relationships, knowledge sharing, and collaboration through its size and shared moral purpose. The investment by the system in a leader for each network to act as a conduit for the communication of the system's vision and policies led to the generation of many shared projects between schools in a network. Principals valued the structure particularly the support and learning it offered them. Although it was a directed approach, they were supportive of it because it clarified the expectations of

their role. The shared vision that they had embraced was well resourced and through participation in the Regional Network's activities their professional growth was enhanced. Principals valued recognition and support from system leaders such as their Regional Network Leader, and were motivated by it. Principals also valued the role of the Regional Network Leader as a support person with whom they could have regular contact. Principals supported the Executive of the network because they saw the governance structure as fair and representative of their interests. Being a part of a shared governance structure ensured that the Regional Network activities were meaningful and the principals worked closely with the Regional Network Leader to develop the agenda for meetings.

However, principals found that unnecessary accountability requirements generated through the Regional Networks added to their workload. They universally regarded the directive from the centre to develop a network strategic plan unfavourably. They were critical of the irrelevant detail in the plan and the time spent on developing it. While the bulk of this work often fell upon the Executive and the Regional Network Leader, principals agreed that a few dot points, as a general focus for the network plan, would have sufficed. Therefore, the development of the network strategic plan was regarded as compliance exercise, which took up a huge amount of the network's time for no good advantage. The network strategic plan had little meaning for individual schools because all schools in the network were different and already had their own strategic plans in place.

The mandated membership of the newly formed Regional Networks was another contentious issue for many principals. However, the greatest negative impact of the mandated membership surfaced where principals experienced a second change to the structure. This occurred after the first 12 months in some networks,

just as the new relationships were consolidated. This second change did not affect many schools but it did affect schools on the tail end of a district, usually within a growth corridor. Principals were given no choice in the move, even if they perceived it as having a negative impact on their school. This led to feelings of disillusionment and withdrawal as newly-formed valuable relationships and connections were lost. The principals who were interviewed for this study were very aware of the resentment felt by some members of Regional Networks as the new structure was implemented, even if it did not impact on them directly.

Principals, whether they were very experienced or less experienced, appreciated affirmation for their work. The principals who received affirmation for their work, from the Regional Network Leader, became motivated by that affirmation. That affirmation worked as an investment in a principal's abilities through the recognition given. This, in turn, led to leadership growth and increased confidence to embrace new challenges. Lack of acknowledgement of the contribution made by some of the principals who were interviewed for this study led them to withdraw from network activities. The broad Systems Thinking approach, which was taken by the centre required compliance. When that compliance was questioned, the experience of some principals was that they paid the price.

Sudden changes in direction of government policy and decisions based on lack of evidence or consultation (from either side of the political spectrum) were a frustration for principals. Such comments related to changes in structure to Regional Networks, mandated membership and complete changes in policy, such as the abandonment of Regional Networks. Principals saw the need to replace what they considered to be arbitrary decision making with a more respectful view of the status quo. If policy was made on the run with little consideration for the consequences to

principals and schools, it was regarded as a self-seeking exercise emanating from ambitious individuals within the system, with little consideration for the consequences that impacted on schools. Principals found sudden policy changes ill-considered, disrespectful and unsettling.

When the system's investment in Regional Networks ended, feelings of abandonment and alienation followed because there was nothing to replace it and principals felt that they had been in the middle of something important that could not be completed. Principals who were interviewed for this project felt that it took a long time for any alternate policy directions to emerge. They were part of a system but were now left to manage for themselves without the resources that they had previously accessed. Principals enjoyed the strong and clear vision that came through the Regional Networks and reported that the subsequent lack of direction lasted for around two years. With the breakdown in any clear direction with which to move forward, principals tried to maintain the status quo. They had invested in the Regional Networks through the relationships and shared projects that had been cultivated. However, it proved difficult to maintain the structure due to the withdrawal of resources. Therefore additional responsibility fell onto the shoulders of the Executive committees, as they remained to run the networks without the same level of support from a system leader.

Some principals (4/10) interviewed for this study perceived a lack of transparency in the way in which things were managed within the system over the period related to Regional Networks and the *Blueprint* agenda implementation (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007a). There was the hint of an inner sanctum of favourite people, a selected few who had access to special privileges because of their connections (such behaviour, referred to in previous chapters, has become the

subject of an anti-corruption investigation). In spite of the feelings of unrest regarding the probity of some appointments that were made, principals largely remained engaged with the vision and the system. Their excitement about the educational reforms of the day and their commitment to what they regarded as a bold vision accompanied by generous resources, led them largely to overlook transgressions because, in their view, they had no control over them.

Principals recognised and were critical of some of the more obvious excesses in the behaviour of central leaders, irrespective of their political persuasion. Such excesses related to flamboyant policy implementation. While principals connected with the vision and recognised the excitement of the times, there was criticism of the extravagant marketing and promotion of the policy. The cost involved in the production of glossy documents drew some reaction from principals struggling to manage their budgets. There was considerable criticism directed against the lavishness of the large, state wide principals' forums, the *Big Days Out*. However, the greatest criticism by the principals interviewed surrounded the launch of the information technology platform, the *Ultraset*. Principals resented having to struggle to manage their own school budgets when their system leaders did not model financial constraint related to program implementation. Principals regarded the unrealistic expectations of the *Ultraset* implementation as placing unnecessary pressure on them and the infrastructure of their schools.

Regional Networks displayed some but not all of the features of Education Networks as determined by the literature. Education Networks display the following features: consistency of values and focus; clarity of structure; agency through a shared commitment to action; utilisation and transfer; dispersed leadership and empowerment; shared resources; and voluntary membership. Regional Networks fall

short in the areas of: *voluntary membership and distributed leadership; network size; and learning interchange*. The Regional Network Leader was the line manager of the principals in the network. Therefore, Regional Network Leaders were agents for the system and a conduit for policy implementation (DEECD, 2010). Regional Networks were not able to evolve naturally in the way that the membership's needs may have driven the direction of the agenda (Mullen & Kochan, 2000).

Membership of Regional Networks was mandated by the system, keeping all networks approximately the same size (25 schools) as a central, and limiting factor (DEECD, 2010). With regard to learning interchange, the typology of networks on a five-point hierarchy previously outlined in the literature review (Hopkins, 2007), shows that at the basic level networks facilitate the sharing of good practice. At the highest level they can be transformative. In Victoria, a Level 4 network model was mandated (DEECD, 2010). It did not grow out of the needs of its members and did not develop from Level 1 – 4, as Hopkins' typology shows (Hopkins, 2007).

Regional Networks, although valued by principals in many respects, were a misnomer. Because of their mandated membership, system-imposed expectations and restricted size, Regional Networks displayed only some of the features of networks that are recognised in the literature. For this reason they are *pseudo-networks* and would have been more appropriately termed *Regional Collaboratives*.

Recommendations for policy makers and contribution to new knowledge about organisational structures for school improvement.

The points that follow outline the learning that can be taken from the study of principals' experiences of Regional Networks and provides an alternative structure for consideration as a more preferable model that addresses some of the shortcomings of the Regional Network structure.

The Regional Network Leader role. A designated system leader to coordinate a collaborative group and act as a conduit for policy directions from the centre is an effective vehicle for generating system change. Principals welcome clear direction from system's leaders and a role such as that of a Regional Network Leader, facilitates alignment and reduces principals' workloads within collaborative groups. However the effectiveness of the system leader is critical and depends on their skills and expertise. Such leaders need to have a broad understanding and experience of the different types of schools that co-exist within a district.

While it is possible to see a potential conflict of interest within the Regional Network Leader role as the line manager of principals, the participants in this study did not see the role as conflicted and equated the RNL role with their own role as principal of a school. Principals in schools have a performance management responsibility in relation to their staff, while at the same time encouraging and facilitating staff development. The intimate knowledge that the Regional Network Leader had of each school in the network and their context, meant that principals perceived the role as appropriate to managing a network principal's performance development. While principals interviewed for this study saw no conflict in the Regional Network Leader role as a line manager, they knew of other colleagues who did not share this view. Therefore, this is an area of potential conflict of interest.

Longevity of tenure. It is beneficial for system leaders such as RNLs, to have longevity of tenure with their group to capitalise on relationships and existing knowledge of the local context. This is particularly helpful for the support of less experienced principals, but all principals benefit from the support of a long-term relationship with a system leader who has a deep understanding of their context.

The Regional Network structure. Meeting regularly in system-organised collaborative groups is supportive of the principal role and enhances individual professional capacity. Principals place a high value on collegiality and value collaboration and the opportunities to share knowledge through professional interactions. Through collaboration, agreed protocols reinforce relationships and strengthen cooperative practices to foster a sense of collective responsibility for the learning of students within their district. Principals enjoy and learn from working on group projects and visiting each other's schools. However, these activities need to be properly resourced by the system and there needs to be surety of resources so that projects can be properly executed and evaluated.

Regional Network governance. Principals value being involved in the decision-making and governance of system-organised collaborative groups, through membership of an Executive committee structure. The governance structure that was in place for the Regional Networks was regarded as fair, representative, and empowered principals. However it is important that the mechanism for recruitment of members to shared leadership roles be transparent and consistent across all such system-organised groups

Regional Network Size. The concept of system-organised groups of around 25 schools works well and was endorsed by the principals who were interviewed for this study. It was seen to be a good size for collaboration and small enough for

effective support by a system leader. The principals valued localised support through regional office staff and a leader who knew their school and context.

Regional Network membership. Mandated membership of system-organised groups is not conducive to best collaborative practice. Principals need access to a range of collaborative associations or self-chosen networks that may more specifically address their needs. Self-chosen groups, at times, may take precedence over system-organised groups. Therefore membership of system-organised groups should not be forced or linked in any way to principal performance management.

Principals as part of the system. Principals saw themselves as part of a system and as such appreciated guidance and direction from the system through the delivery of a definitive vision. They had a strong sense of their own autonomy but clearly placed this within the bigger picture of being part of a system. Principals valued the support provided through quality system-generated resources, whether those were policy and curriculum documents or data sets that assisted them to make evidence-based decisions about learning needs. However, excessive and unnecessary requirements for documentation were seen to be a waste of time. If principals regarded that the centre was making unreasonable demands of them, they would work around it within the letter of the guidelines and do what was best for their own school.

Affirmation and fairness. Principals of all levels of experience valued affirmation of their work by the system. If affirmation and recognition was not forthcoming, feelings of alienation and abandonment could follow. Principals valued clear, fair processes as part of the system's operations and did not see transparency of process with regard to all practices of the system.

Changes in policy. Changes in policy need to be kept to a minimum to allow for existing initiatives to run their course and be properly evaluated. Change for its own sake, or for political purposes, is resented by principals and hinders their work. Principals appreciate longevity in policy directions. Frequent changes to the structure of system-organised groups make it difficult to consolidate relationships and initiate, implement and evaluate common projects. Pasi Sahlberg (2015), in writing about the success of the Finnish system, spoke about the essential components of political stability and sustainable leadership as important moderating influences. The basic values and vision for Finnish education have remained unchanged since the 1970s.

A steady political situation since the 1980s and sustained educational leadership have enabled Finnish schools and teachers to concentrate on developing teaching and learning. (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 184)

Riley (2015) while reporting on the 2015 results of The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey commented on Finland's success as an international leader in education emphasising the importance of separating politics from education.

Depoliticizing education would allow conversations aimed at building cases for change with highest quality evidence drawn from many sources and not driven by short-term political advantage. As the Finns realized, education is far too important. The evidence from this report and many other studies carried out by the research community demonstrate that the successful ingredients to a continuously improving system that are abundant in Finland are generally diminishing in Australia, not growing. (p. 23)

Tri-Collaborative model (TriCol). The introduction of a Tri-Collaborative model (TriCol) is presented for consideration as a structure to better cater to the needs of the diverse settings within a school district. This structure builds on and extends the practice of the occasional sub-regional umbrella to group three local Regional Networks for special events or conferences. In this model, three Regional Network-type groups each known as a Collaborative, with their own Collaborative Leader (CL) are linked through a trio of leaders called Tri-Collaborative Coordinators who together are responsible for the broader coordination and expert support of the schools in the TriCol. The TriCol is the combined group of three Collaboratives that work as a larger team and interconnect with their partner members as secondary, primary or special school principals, depending on involvement in common projects and interest groups. The TriCol Coordinators or trio, represent experts drawn from across primary, secondary and special school backgrounds. Together this trio could provide the necessary expertise to cover the various settings that comprise the district's schools across three Collaboratives. A problem with the Regional Network model was the expectation that the leader would have expertise across primary, secondary and specialist school settings. This proved to be an unrealistic expectation and some schools within that structure were only superficially catered for, depending on the expertise and background of their Regional Network Leader. This is also reflected in the findings of Griffin et al. (2010).

The TriCol model provides both scale and flexibility for like-schools to work together within a broader district. Within the proposed structure, flexible vertical and horizontal streams can readily meet across the TriCol in their primary, secondary and special schools configurations. This would be particularly helpful when working

on common interest projects led by the TriCol Coordinator with the relevant expertise. For example, the TriCol Coordinator (secondary) could lead a project on secondary retention or literacy, while the TriCol Coordinator (special) might lead an action research project related to autism. The TriCol Coordinator (primary) could, for example, lead a primary action research project on numeracy acquisition. This structure provides the flexibility to meet as either mixed or specialised groups of schools, while providing high levels of expertise to address the specific needs of the various school settings across the Tri-Col.

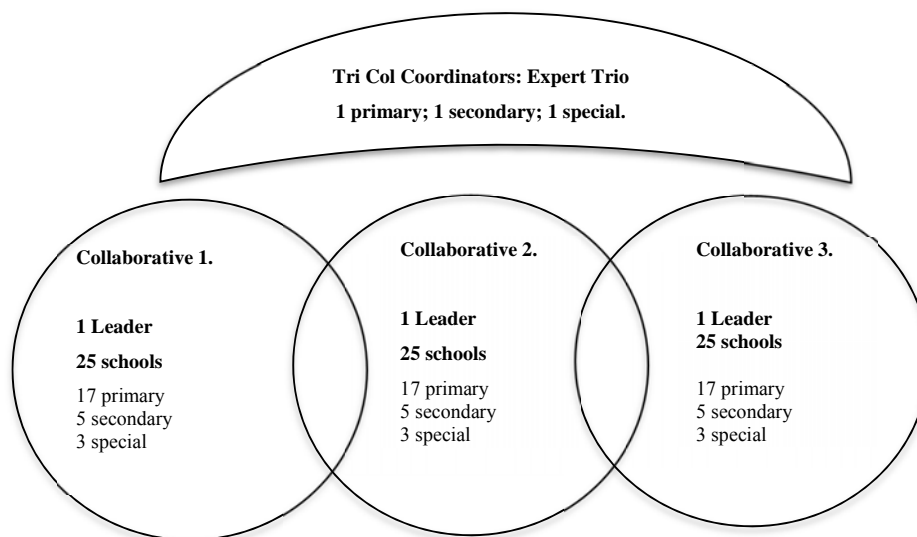


Figure 9. The TriCol Model.

Summary

System-organised collaborative groups led by a system leader are effective mechanisms to support system wide reform and alignment. However, principals

should be widely surveyed about what they see as the best structure to suit their needs.

Projects initiated within such system-organised groups should have longevity and should be resourced by the system for at least a five-year timeframe, based on a clear rationale of action research because such projects need continuity, sustainability and evaluability. Participation in projects should also be voluntary and meaningful to individual schools. Longitudinal evaluation of projects is advocated so that schools do not jump from one initiative to another without ever following through to an endpoint that has been evaluated to deliver evidence-based insights into teaching and learning.

Unnecessary and artificial accountability demands from the system, directed towards collaborative school groups, hinders the work of principals who need to be trusted to do their work and should not be micro-managed by system leaders. Membership of system-organised collaboratives such as the TriCol model which was presented in Figure 6, alongside membership of a range of self-chosen networks, would cater to the diverse needs of individual principals and their settings.

Mandated membership of any system-organised groups is not conducive to best collaborative practice and is not supportive of the principal role. Attendance at, and participation in such groups, should not be linked to principal performance as was the case with the Regional Network structure.

Clear direction from the system through the delivery of an adequately resourced, definitive and sustainable vision is supportive of the principal role. Changes in policy, however, need to be kept to a minimum to allow for existing initiatives to run their course and be properly evaluated.

Principals of all levels of experience need affirmation and recognition of their work, by the system. System leaders should seek ways to embed affirmation and recognition into principals' experiences to promote their wellbeing and to avoid feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction.

Limitations of the Study

The principals interviewed for this study were drawn from the primary, secondary and specialist school sectors across five of the nine originally formed Regional Networks that existed in the Southern Metropolitan Region of Victoria between October 2008 and June 2012. There were 70 such Regional Networks constituted across the state of Victoria. It should also be noted that this study examined only principals' experiences of Regional Networks. It did not look at the impact that these networks had on teachers and schools and this would be a recommendation for future study.

This research project adopted a hermeneutic phenomenology-type approach to its research and analysed and interpreted the lived experiences of 10 principals with regard to their membership of a Regional Network. The analysis of themes was derived from the transcripts of participants and based entirely on the experiences of those principals.

As a former Regional Network Leader, the researcher was very aware of the insider nature of her position. Every effort was made to avoid bias as outlined in the chapter containing details of the research design. However, as the perspective was phenomenological in inclination, and experiences within that methodology are accepted as being constructed, that premise also applied to the researcher. For that reason, the point is made and listed as a limitation. However, it was believed that the

advantages of being an insider researcher outweighed the risks. Participants spoke freely of their experiences without having to explain the structure and the system, and therefore, the insider status was seen as a positive factor in the collection of rich data.

The timing of this research occurred three years after the Regional Networks ended. It is possible that the experiences of principals would have been expressed differently if this research had been conducted three years earlier.

At the time the interviews were conducted, an investigation into aspects of the system's probity over that period had just begun. The Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) investigations that began in April 2015, were referred to by several participants and it is possible that this process impacted on some of the participants' comments. The IBAC investigations revealed an alarming level of financial corruption that operated within the system over the period of the existence of the Regional Networks however, this appears to have related to only a few key senior leaders. The exposure and extent of this corruption shocked principals, teachers and education support staff in schools. At the time that these interviews were being conducted this information was just beginning to be discussed in the media. However, the full implication of the levels of corruption were not revealed until some months after the data collection was completed.

Implications for Further Research

The Regional Network model was short lived due to a change in government policy. Regional Networks did not have the opportunity to realise their potential because of their premature end. A longitudinal study, which began to track the impact of Regional Networks had started to gather data (Griffin et al., 2010)

however this study was abandoned after two years. The progress findings of this study were reduced to a report, which was included in the literature review. Aspects of those findings are reflected in the experiences of principals who participated in this study, particularly in relation to the relevance of network activities to the types of schools and the level of expertise of the network leader in being able to support the needs of a variety of school types. A longitudinal study to track the effectiveness of a Regional Network-type structure is an area for further research.

Further research into principals' experiences of supportive system-organised collaborative structures is also recommended to ascertain the range of structures that would best cater to the needs of principals in different localities, such as rural settings.

Concluding Comments

The years of the *Blueprint* policies (DE&T, 2003; DEECD, 2007a) represented a distinctive and innovative time in Victorian educational reform in which the sheer quantum and scope of the strategies and resources fed into the system were unprecedented. A theory of action for system alignment, of which the Regional Networks were one component, marks this period as presenting an ambitious reform agenda. Principals embraced the vision and were optimistic and motivated by the clear direction that was supported by a plethora of resources, including extensive opportunities for world-class professional learning. However the challenges of mandated membership and the merging of former collaborative groups of different cultures presented some friction. RNLs did not always have the expertise to address the diverse needs of the schools within the network; therefore some principals were better supported than others. There was an acknowledged

flamboyance of policy implementation, which excited, engaged and motivated principals, opening their eyes to the international educational arena. But that flamboyance also concerned some principals.

The Regional Networks were a tool to mobilise system alignment, promote a culture of lifelong learning and return principals' focus to the classroom. The structure was successful in doing that and changed the culture of principalship, moving away from administration, back to teaching and learning. For this reason Regional Networks can be seen as an ambitious attempt at system-wide school improvement. System leaders invested heavily in the Regional Networks and principals were disappointed when the structure came to a premature end leaving no opportunity for the structure to run its course and be properly evaluated.

Through the reconstruction of stories, examination of extended extracts and the analysis of themes emerging from transcripts that are categorised according to what helped and hindered principals in their work, the lived experiences of the 10 principals involved in this study together with the TriCol model of collaborative system groupings, contribute new understandings to structures of system wide school improvement.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Examples of the process of analysis

The following full interview transcript (Laura), interview extract with numbered lines, photos, table of themes and journal entries, show the process that was followed in the analysis of transcripts. After reading through the transcript several times to gain an overall sense of the experience, lines of the transcript were numbered to facilitate the location of ideas and themes. These pages were then printed, cut out and organised into themes which were later transferred into tables as shown on the next pages. This process was repeated for each of the 10 interviews. As a later step in the process, combined participant theme documents such as the one included for Theme 3b. Opportunities arising from the change to Regional Networks, were collated to document the number of participants who identified the same theme.

Transcript of interview with Laura on 10 September 2015.

RESEARCHER: So can you tell me a little about how long you have been a principal, and then, I am interested in your experience of being a member of the Regional Networks.

LAURA: I celebrated 20 years of principalship last year. So obviously I'm in my 21st year as a principal I've had 40 years with the Department of Education. So the journey for me in my early years as a principal I suppose was really built around networks in the sense of belonging to a professional collegial group. So that was back in the 90s when I was principal of ---- where network process was incredibly strong. So as a young principal building collegial trust, regular meetings led by a leader was the way that I understood that principals were being supported both in

their schools and professionally. That was 1994-2001. In 2002 arriving at ---- Primary School there has certainly been a change in the way networks operate and that has been largely due to changes in government and the emphasis that different governments have had on the purpose of the network. So if we go back to a few years ago pre-Liberal government I think the networks were still very strong. We had a clear, Regional Network Leader, who had personal contact with principals throughout the year, more than once a year, and they we're very easy to contact, they understood the needs of all of the schools and were very available to you if you needed them.

RESEARCHER: Are you talking about the structure that was in place from October 2008 to the end of June 2012?

LAURA: Yes. Is that the period you are talking about?

RESEARCHER: Yes. That's the period I'm talking about.

So can I just ask you, you talked a lot about the trust and accessibility and that sort of thing. How was that period different from what went before? Do you remember what it was like before that?

LAURA: Umm [*pause*] What did we have before that?

RESEARCHER: Well there were different sorts of leaders but the networks were bigger and I don't think there was the same agenda of school improvement.

LAURA: No, there probably wasn't. I am just thinking back to the days at -- -- where we created our own agenda and it was very much driven by ourselves and we met at the ----- down in ----. Didn't we?

I suppose in terms of that 2008 period, I'm not so sure whether the agenda of pure accountability was necessarily a positive one. I think we moved from understanding that it was okay to talk about your role as a principal and the issues

that you had in your school, to be purely driven by student outcomes. We were battling the notion of a British leagues table where results of your school's data were put up at the network and the notion of the best schools and that schools were plotted against each other, came in around that period when it was very much based around accountability. Accountability, for everything. I'm not sure that there was a lot of leadership in that role, in fact, really I have very rarely seen, in that period, the role of the network leader as a leader, that's the ones I've had. I've only seen their role as managers or deliverers of information from the government and the priorities of the day. So I think the agenda was around accountability as student outcomes, it was the time of Blueprint wasn't it?

RESEARCHER: Yes. The Blueprint was driving system alignment and trying to lift schools so they were all on the same page and accountability was certainly one of those things. But with regard to the network, all networks were expected to develop a strategic plan. How did you find all that, and how did that impact on your school and what meaning did it have?

LAURA: Look there were good parts of it and I think, ultimately, it came down to and to the nature of the various principals in the network and their view of what their role in the network should be. There are some principals who go into the network and want to commit themselves to the greatest good for the greatest number. I think they go in seeing that we are educators in the state education system, there is a system in place and we are committed to it and we want it to be the best it can be. So in those days when we were developing strategic plans I think we were still doing it *for* the Department, so that they were accountable to those above them. However in that time we did have some very strong educational leadership coming through from the government, the e-learning, the E5 model.

RESEARCHER: Yes I have got some things here from that period [*Developmental Framework for School Leaders*, E5 book, a sample of the books distributed to all principals as professional reading] and I am wondering what impact these had on you and helped you in your schools.

LAURA: Well very much so.

The Effective Schools Model. I still use the *Effective Schools Model* today. It's a strong visual and practical model for school councils to understand, for teachers to understand and to use it to articulate the vision. The principal performance development was really around *The Leadership Development Framework* where you could see the areas to strengthen, areas you needed to build on. The *E5 Instructional Model* was a fantastic model because our school is now an *IB [International Baccalaureate]* school. That was the basis on which we were able to articulate an inquiry-based model of learning.

The destruction of those documents and the complete, what's the word, *abandonment* of those documents once the new government came in was one of the greatest tragedies that happened in education.

RESEARCHER: So can I ask you how then, the rolling out of all this information and so on, how was that facilitated by having a leader of a network, a Regional Network Leader. Did that make a difference or do you think it would have happened anyway? How did you see the Regional Network Leader's role in all of this with regard to professional support?

LAURA: Again, I don't think the Regional Network Leaders, the Regional Network Leaders that I have seen, have played a leadership role and I think there is a great disparity between the role - the clarity around the expectation that principals would have of them, being leaders rather than managers. I really haven't seen, as I

said, leadership coming from them. The leadership came from Darrell Fraser, from the secretary, from the government, having said that there was also this almost charismatic kind of change going on that enveloped us all. I think we were all very excited to see that there was a Blueprint, there was a clear articulated and documented vision around what education should look like in a school and who the stakeholders should be and how to involve them in the development of those. So I think the strategy at the regional level, also, I think was inspirational in terms of the sense of understanding the importance of understanding the strategic plan in the school and the importance of having all stakeholders engaged in the development of the school strategic plan.

RESEARCHER: So do you think that could have happened without the Regional Network Leader role?

LAURA: I don't think so because I think on the scale of principalship, a new principal and an experienced principal, the Regional Network Leader has got to galvanise everybody so that those who have been around for a long time don't just say this is just another new thing coming into the Department and we'll ignore it and go about doing what we have always done, and new principals do need a lot of guidance, support and visits to enable them to understand and unpack. We did a lot of that at the network meetings. There was a lot of opportunity to sit around in groups and unpack the strategic plan, unpack the framework for school leaders, and develop our understanding in a deeper way. So I think they acted more as facilitators.

RESEARCHER: Did all this work help the network generate some goal congruence?

LAURA: Yes, I do. I think we were able to establish, when was the Instructional Practice?

RESEARCHER: Well that was a project of the network, Instructional Rounds, is that what you mean?

LAURA: Yes. I thought they were horrendous, personally.

RESEARCHER: So that was a particular project that belonged to your network?

LAURA: Yes it was. Well, a lot of networks at the time. Ours particularly. Yes.

RESEARCHER: So did you participate in Instructional Rounds?

LAURA: I did.

RESEARCHER: Tell me about that.

LAURA: I found it a tokenistic process. I think to go into a school and look at a problem of practice, which is a deficit model, into another school, to observe teachers that we didn't know, and to look at what the teacher was saying, what the children were saying, was tokenistic and frankly, embarrassing.

I think we could have looked at more of the development of peer coaching, development of the trust and relationships that we need to have in our own schools rather than to look at another school. And the role of the Regional Network Leader at the time was to get you out and go into other schools and it absolutely a tick the box thing because *they* were being pressured into doing that. I felt that was imposed on all of us. I know it was meant to be optional but there was a sense that you were pretty out on the edge, if you didn't do it.

Knowing what I know now about the importance of building trust and having important and professional forms of reciprocal feedback with the staff, I don't think that was a good model at all. However, we learnt from it, to be better than that.

RESEARCHER: So, with regard to the network, you've spoken a lot about the importance of professional trust and so on. I am interested in that period and whether there was that professional trust and collegiality and how was that generated then?

LAURA: I think that in our network we had some exceptional principals, one who is still the network leader [*chairperson*] to this day. There are some exceptional principals who by the very nature of their commitment to state education, the commitment to their schools, the commitment to ensuring that government priorities are implemented, our network has been incredibly successful. The fact that during that time we had 100% participation at network meetings for a range of reasons: one, because it was exciting to come and explore and have those book club meetings around "*Leadership on the Line*" the book that you have got there.

RESEARCHER: So you saw the network as a learning organisation?

LAURA: Yes. I did. It also created opportunities for wider discussion. They were platforms to maybe have a lunch with other principals around a common theme, the book club would then generate discussion around issues in your own schools. And then from those discussions you may have followed up with other principals. Yes, I think they generated good educational discourse.

RESEARCHER: So what would have been the Regional Network Leaders role in that or would it have happened anyway?

LAURA: I think the book club would have happened anyway. We probably would have generated that ourselves, as the desire to make sure when we read those

books, was to make sure we were following up with each other. I think, you don't know what you've got until it's gone, and the last few years we have seen in our network, a deterioration in numbers, a lack of vision educationally. We've had a rotating number of whatever they are called now (*referring to Senior Advisors*). It has been disastrous.

From my perspective I've lost motivation to go. So I think the fact that we don't have it now, to look back into that period and see a government that had a really clear educational vision, that was backed up by resources at the regional level to then come to network meetings and share those, the vision and to share the documentation that was coming through and generate discussion among the principals, was really, really excellent. I think, Brian Caldwell, there were some really excellent educational academics around, that assisted with the driving of taking principals to higher order thinking. I think principals can get very caught in the day-to-day technical aspects of their leadership and this really helped us all to focus on educational leadership and the core purpose of our role, which is around student outcomes and student learning and driving student engagement in learning.

RESEARCHER: So, I guess we are talking about *Blueprint* policy then, and all that suite of initiatives that was trying to bring the System forward?

LAURA: Yes

RESEARCHER: Can you comment then, a bit more on professional learning? I know you have a bit, but could you extend that, also professional support. What your perception of that was. I guess I am mindful of the fact that the Regional Network Leader was a conduit for policy, from the top.

LAURA: Yes. A conduit. Not a leader. As a conduit, it was the transformation of information from the top. Again, I think they were able to deliver

shared data to the network that may have been generated, but again, the role was clearly not one of leadership.

RESEARCHER: So where was the leadership in the network. Where did that come from, or was it there?

LAURA: Yes. I think in that period of time there were a lot of highly motivated principals who had been in their role for quite a long time so they were able to, I think we had more consistent levels of experience in principalship at that time, and now many have gone and we have many assistant principals and principals in acting roles so I think it was motivated from within the network. We had a lot of people who had interests to follow.

RESEARCHER: If we think about the governance structure of the network, there was an executive committee.

LAURA: Yes

RESEARCHER: Was that where the leadership came from?

LAURA: Yes

RESEARCHER: Did you feel the leadership at that time was shared? Did people have an opportunity to be involved?

LAURA: I think the Executive has always been very important. It's really important for a small group of people to go away, take on board the views that are expressed at a network meeting and unpack it. And I think in that time there was so much documentation, such clear vision, the *Blueprint* was there, the *E5* was there, we also had the opportunity as principals to develop through despite the ridiculous name and the political agenda that was attached to it, the *High Performing Principals Program* afforded me probably the best professional learning I have had

in 20 years being in the *Evolving Vision* program at Harvard. I think it was a highly charged period educationally.

So yes, I think the Executive played a very important part. We were all on the same page because there was a vision. You either agreed with it or you didn't but there was a vision in place, a really clear one, around retention in secondary colleges and we were also looking at that time P-12 and special schools, we weren't just focusing on one area. We were very much one. The fact that we had secondary school principals, special school principals and primaries attending the one meeting and people very rarely missed a meeting because we were talking about the same kinds of things around how to engage students, how can we best deliver in all of our school, high quality programs in all our schools. We had the coaches coming in, literacy and numeracy coaches. So there was a lot of funding that went in there as well.

Some schools, on the down side were identified as not performing, but as a network we handled that very well, but I'm not sure how individual schools felt about that. You were glad though when the data went up that you were somewhere in the middle or above state average. I don't think that was a very healthy period putting schools up against each other.

RESEARCHER: And was that different from a previous time?

LAURA: Well, I think we had just moved into a highly accountable period with student outcomes. We had done *Early Years* and *Middle Years* programs that hadn't changed, that actually didn't lead to improved student learning outcomes and we absolutely have to address what we are here for, which is to improve student learning outcomes. So that was pretty much the clear agenda but also principals were valued. There were a lot of resources put into their professional development.

RESEARCHER: So that was the System at the time?

LAURA: Yes, definitely

RESEARCHER: So you talked about the impact on your professional knowledge from those *Blueprint* initiatives such as the *High Performing Principals Program* (HPP) which was one specific one. Were there others within the network structure? Because the HPP was a *Blueprint* initiative but not generated by the network. You talked about *E5* before and the *Developmental Framework*, those sorts of things, how did the network roll out those things as professional learning?

LAURA: Those things were unpacked within the network structure and we also had our conferences, which was very much a time for principals to get together but it was also a time to develop aspects of the government's agenda.

[Short interruption to interview due to phone, and short conversation with office staff. Resumption of interview after a couple of minutes].

RESEARCHER: We were talking about the conferences and I am interested in the collegiality side of things and whether there were symbols or logos that bound you together as a network.

LAURA: Well we developed the ----- network name (*by combining the letters of the former merged networks*). We spent a long time working out what that would look like. We didn't actually have a logo for that the new name galvanized the network and it was very clear, that we were one. The network name, I think, was important, just so we knew that we stretched right back from ---- to----. And people came from far and wide, to attend all those activities.

I still have a small degree of cynicism, even as we go through the IBAC situation at the moment. There were clearly people, while this period was deemed to be a highly consultative period, the government had many, many consultative

processes, of course the chairperson of the network clearly need to be at the regional and state level, to pass on information, that was great. I think that was fantastic, and they were totally committed to making sure the views of the network were passed through. But it was very much a boys' network, it has come to light, people were tapped on the shoulder and people who were seen to be maybe too *moutheys* were overlooked. We clearly saw the same people being tapped on the shoulder and that was under Darrell Fraser and although it was a visionary period it was also such a boys' network and girls' network.

And I know this is a personal thing, but I have never felt valued at a network level or from a regional level.

RESEARCHER: So, were you ever on the Executive?

LAURA: Yes. I did. I did my turn. I went on the Executive early but also as you get older you feel that your views, you don't want to, because I used to speak quite a lot at network meetings, you also don't want to be seen as a big mouth or a loud mouth and I know my views, well I felt my views were never respected by people who were in those network meetings that came from the region.

RESEARCHER: What about by your colleagues?

LAURA: I think colleagues call you when they need you and know that you do have expertise, and that's what I value. I really value the phone that says, I'm struggling with this, or School Council is doing this. That was very strong then, and that's probably because as principals, we were all of the same era. But certainly the network was strong because we all wanted to be there and the principals were all the same era. We all *got* each other.

RESEARCHER: Membership was mandatory though. Did that bother you? Did you ever feel obligated?

LAURA: Never. Because I loved it. I wanted to go. Which is different to now as I sit here with you. I loved seeing colleagues. I loved the round table discussion which was vibrant people could talk openly, definitely about what was going on in their school. It was high energy because the government had a high challenging agenda, that we all wanted our schools to be achieving the best for our schools.

RESEARCHER: So what different?

LAURA: There is no *Blueprint* agenda. Sink or swim on your own. The depletion of resources has been astronomical and the regional level has been decimated.

RESEARCHER: So do you feel that because there was someone attached to look after 25 schools rather than 60 that was an important thing to facilitate contact?

LAURA: Definitely. Even if just for some affirmation. I suppose I've got confidence in my learning after 40 years in education but it's still nice to speak to someone one on one, about what you are doing and get some affirmation. Now the Mid cycle review process involves meeting together in a group and discussing our work, I don't think that the best way and I know it's been done because there is a lack of resources. The decimation of literacy support at the region, EAL, Mathematics, coaches; they took away the core needs of schools, which is about having support in your schools.

RESEARCHER: Can you talk about the way data was used in the network? Before when we were talking about accountability, and schools were compared by their data, you said you felt that was not a good way to go.

LAURA: No. It was about: look at this school, there data is way up there, let's all go and look at this school, which is not a good fit for everyone.

RESEARCHER: There would have been a data protocol agreement within the network? Did that have meaning for you and the members of the network?

LAURA: Yes. And the calibre of the principals in our network was very, very high and people had great respect for each other's schools and what was going in there. There was only one agenda, to be supportive and respectful of each other. Having said that, of course, zones came in and schools were marketing. But the principals got out, but the core elements of teachers getting out, we did what we needed to do. There were, literacy and numeracy networks, which were good. But now we see really no resources put into our teachers or networks.

RESEARCHER: So, the resources fed into the network at the time, like literacy and numeracy coaches and a coordinator or a leader of the network responsible for a smaller number of school, do you feel that helped you in your role.

LAURA: Definitely. I think it helped. Yes I do. I do. We need to have that. I would like to ring someone at the network now but there is nobody. But because I have the IB network and in a different position, I do have a lot of strong networks and use them. But the resources that have been taken away from the regional level have absolutely impacted on the network.

I mean attendance now at a network meeting would be around 25% if you're lucky, on a good day maybe 50 [*principals and assistant principals*]. There are some people you never see, they do not come. Now is that because, why? I don't know, the network is not, the network is suffering from inexperienced people running portfolios. There was a clear message about a new generation of people taking up positions and that's fine, however, it's the blind leading the blind. Even to run a portfolio around student wellbeing with an assistant principal or someone who

has been in the role for a very little amount of time, I think is impacting on the quality of the conversations and again, the leadership.

We are going through a period of principal retirement and attrition and the effect of that is probably quite evident because there is not a Regional Network Leader from strong Regional Network Leadership coming through to guide that. The Regional Network Leader now coming in now is to tell you what they don't know.

RESEARCHER: So you're talking about the Senior Advisor role now?

LAURA: Yes. The Senior Advisor role.

RESEARCHER: So do you think that within a network there is value in having a leader designated to that role?

LAURA: Yes. Yes. More so than ever because of the change of generational, for example, I've got a young assistant principal who is very confident, but he doesn't know what he doesn't know.

RESEARCHER: Can I just ask you about the Regional Network Leader. Did you ever feel there was a conflict there, with regard to them doing your performance review but they were representing the Centre. How did you feel about all that?

LAURA: I suppose I've always had confidence in the work that I am doing in my school and the people around me, and the role of the network leader has been to have a strong conversation around what's happening in my school and the direction it was going in, and I suppose that person played more of checklist role for me. Have you thought of? Please make sure that this is happening. That was more the tone of the conversation.

I've never felt intimidated, as you would know from me, I've felt disappointed in knowing that I have been discarded for such a long time, ever to be seen at any level as being worthy of being consulted. And that's how I felt for a long

time. So now I found my own strengths and the school is thriving. I'm now and have been since 2010, part of an IB network that is thriving and growing and fully focused on an educational vision that's why the period in education we are talking about here was so fantastic. We were almost overly inundated with documentation, as you have some of it spread out in front of you, for a young principal, and even for an experienced principal there was a lot to unpack in that time. Fantastic. It was probably, in my time, the best period as a principal because of the educational vision. The *Blueprint* was fantastic.

RESEARCHER: So there was a lot of knowledge creation through the System?

LAURA: Oh absolutely! Total knowledge creation. We were learning new things. The whole notion of change - principals understanding the importance of change opening our minds to the world. Richard Elmore, other top academics. It brought principals to the understanding that they needed to be lifelong learners themselves and to continue to develop their own professional knowledge and skills as well as their teachers.

RESEARCHER: So if you had to sum up that period for you, as a principal, what helped you and what hindered you?

LAURA: I think the government's clear agenda of the *Blueprint* and all the resources that went with the *Blueprint*, the regional structures that allowed us to access coaches and consultants, either physically in your school or only a phone call away; it was a highly charged time.

I think that the conversation at the network level was focused on the important things around being in a network, focused around student outcomes. Not that we got all of these things right, a la the *Instructional Rounds*. The looking out,

the inspiration for principals to look beyond their schools, to actually say we are in a network and there are other schools in the network doing great things and we have an opportunity to visit them, and find out what they are doing, was a very open period of time. However there were also schools that saw themselves as maybe above other schools and they had a bit of a buy-out of being involved.

But knowing that the Regional Network Leader was going to be at the meeting every time was a reassuring point, if you wanted to talk, as a network, about something that was happening at the region you could do that, the person was physically there, that's not the case now. The Regional Director didn't come to every meeting so I think the Regional Network Leader was important in being able to take information straight back, and then get back to principals immediately. But there was a lot to get back to because we had a clear agenda. And I think the vacuum in educational leadership and the depletion of regional resources in the last few years, has led to I think, a much weaker sense of the network. Plus we have young leaders who don't have the experience or the understanding of the purpose of the networks and I think maybe the network strategic plan and what is a network about has been lost.

RESEARCHER: Do you think the Regional Network Leader was helpful in supporting young leaders coming through?

LAURA: Oh Yes. Definitely.

RESEARCHER: So what didn't work for you in the network?

LAURA: I think the networks have always worked for me.

RESEARCHER: What hindered you if anything?

LAURA: For me, the regional view, my perception around lack of acknowledgement that I was doing anything right at all, no acknowledgement at all, and at times absolute exclusion.

RESEARCHER: So can I just ask you: was that related to a personality thing from that network leader or was it something that was a system problem.

LAURA: Well, the system is an organic process that involves people, so the system itself, didn't exclude me. I think there was a systematic sense of boys' network and girls' network, where people were chosen to be in the inner circle and they continued to be, over decades. So it didn't matter which government was in.

RESEARCHER: Within that period we are talking about as well, people were chosen ones?

LAURA: Oh yes, it was continuous. Constant.

Then you wonder what it is you are lacking, probably being a *yes* person is one of them, but my commitment and passion for state education has never, ever wavered. And as I head towards retirement in the 12 months I look back and know that I have loved every day but the thing that I have regretted most, not regretted, but been disappointed in most, was not to be seen as someone worthy to be considered to be consulted about anything at a regional level. So, I can live with it, but I have just wondered why.

But for principals in our network, the work that they do, without a Regional Network Leader, or Senior Education Officer or whatever (pause) it's had so many names, I think as we go forward, it could be incredibly dangerous. Because we have a new government that's come in that's about the *Education State* and we still aren't seeing much happening with them.

RESEARCHER: If I could distinguish, for a minute, between the Regional Network Leader role and the Senior Advisor role because they were different. There was a policy difference in their roles.

LAURA: Yes, that's right.

RESEARCHER: Senior Advisors had 60 schools and it was more of a hands-off thing. So if we could just focus on the Regional Network Leader-type role, how did you see that in relation to its value if at all?

LAURA: Very supportive, very personable, very visible, assisted with resources, helped people to connect to each other.

RESEARCHER: But at the same time you saw problems with that coordination and leadership role at that level, with regard to some chosen people?

LAURA: Yes, we saw people shifted from regions, there's always been a question around merit while there has been such a strong emphasis placed on principal positions and appointments so driven by process and merit, the process of the appointment of Regional Directors and assistant Regional Directors and Regional Network Leaders, has for me, always been questionable. We have always wondered how people get transferred and moved so there is a degree of cynicism around the rhetoric and what's expected of principals in their schools and appointments at a regional level, clearly with IBAC, the jobs for the boys has come to fruition, so that's turned out to be not just a dissatisfaction for me, but quite a reality. So there are still some people who have been in those jobs forever, are they there because they are brilliant at what they do or just incredibly strong political beings who understand the System and work through it no matter what the political challenge or persuasion of the day is? So there are regional people and network people who have managed to stay where they are and good on them, but I don't

know if that's helped to drive the change that is needed now, when schools are far more independent in the way they are going.

Yes, at that time, we all had a sense that support was a phone call away, it was at the next network meeting; we were driven by a common agenda. I think that has dissipated. And that was a time when schools first started looking globally, I think I mentioned that earlier, and we are continuing that, times have changed, the way many of our schools are now establishing networks globally, internationally, means that probably the role of the network has changed. I just don't think we are sharing that and opportunities have been missed round the network leadership role, now, but then the resources that have gone.

So for that period of time, the Regional Network Leaders were very important to the growth of the network and remaining to be able to achieve the government's agenda and the region's strategic plan through to the network strategic plan. I think they were all in alignment and there was a clear, consistent, common language from the government to the region, to the network, to the school. I think we were all very clear about focusing on improved student outcomes and retention.

Transcript with numbered lines

1 **Transcript of Interview with LAURA on 10th September 2015**

2

3 RESEARCHER: So can you tell me a little about how long you have been a
4 principal, and then, I am interested in your experience of being a member of the
5 regional networks.

6

7 LAURA: I celebrated 20 years of principalship last year. So obviously I'm in my
8 21st year as a principal I've had 40 years with the Department of Education. So
9 the journey for me in my early years as a principal, I suppose was really built
10 around networks in the sense of belonging to a professional collegial group. so
11 that was back in the 90s when I was principal of YYYY where network process
12 was incredibly strong so as a young principal building collegial trust, regular
13 meetings led by a leader. That was the way I understood that principals were
14 being supported both in their schools and professionally. That was 1994-2001.
15 In 2002 arriving at XXXX Primary School there has certainly been a change in the
16 way networks operate and that has been largely due to changes in government
17 and the emphasis that different governments have had on the purpose of the
18 network. So if we go back to a few years ago pre Liberal government I think the
19 networks were still very strong. We had a clear, Regional Network Leader, who
20 had personal contact with principals throughout the year, more than once a year,
21 and they we're very easy to contact, they understood the needs of all of the
22 schools and were very available to you if you needed them .

23

24 RESEARCHER: Are you talking about the structure that was in place from
25 October 2008 to the end of June 2012?

26

27 LAURA: Yes. Is that the period you are talking about?

28

29 RESEARCHER: Yes. That's the period I'm talking about.

30

31 So can I just ask you, you talked a lot about the trust and accessibility and that
32 sort of thing... How was that period different from what went before? Do you
33 remember what it was like before that?

34

35 LAURA: Umm (pause) What did we have before that?

36

37 RESEARCHER: Well there were different sorts of leaders but the networks were
38 bigger and I don't think there was the same agenda of school improvement.

39

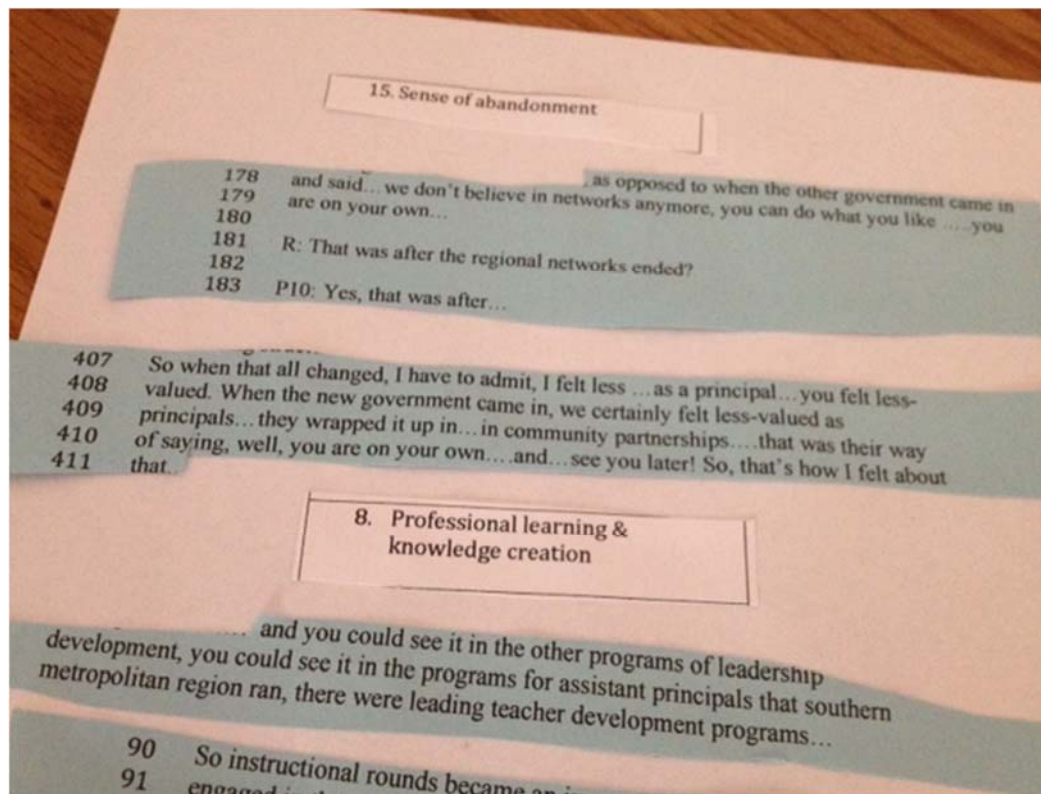
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41 LAURA: No, there probably wasn't. I am just thinking back to the days at XXXX
42 where we created our own agenda and it was very much driven by ourselves and
43 we met at the XXXXX down in XXXX. Didn't we?

44

45 I suppose in terms of that 2008 period, I'm not so sure whether the agenda of
46 pure accountability was necessarily a positive one. I think we moved from
47 understanding that it was okay to talk about your role as a principal and the
48 issues that you had in your school, to be purely driven by student outcomes. We
49 were battling the notion of a British leagues table where results of your school's

Process of cutting and organising extracts under themes



Tabulated themes from Laura's transcript

THEMES	FROM TRANSCRIPT of LAURA
Collegiality and Relationships	I've had 40 years with the Department of Education. So the journey for me in my early years as a principal I suppose was really built around it works in the sense of belonging to a professional collegial group so that was back in the 90s when I was principal of YYYY where network process was incredibly strong so as a young principal building collegial trust, regular meetings led by a leader, was the way. That was the way that I understood that principals were being supported both in

	<p>their schools and professionally.</p> <p>I think that in our network we had some exceptional principals, one who is still the network leader (<i>chairperson</i>) to this day (pause) there are some exceptional principals who by the very nature of their commitment to state education, the commitment to their schools, the commitment to ensuring that government priorities are implemented, our network has been incredibly successful. The fact that during that time we had 100% participation at network meetings</p> <p>things were unpacked within the network structure and we also had our conferences, which was very much a time for principals to get together but it was also a time to develop aspects of the government's agenda.</p> <p>Well we developed the XXXX network name (<i>by combining the letters of the former merged networks</i>) We spent a long time working out what that would look like. We didn't actually have a logo for that, the new name galvanized the network and it was very clear that we were one. The network name, I think, was important, just so we knew that we stretched right back from XXXX to XXXX. And people came from far and wide, to attend all those activities.</p> <p>I think colleagues call you when they need you and know that you do have expertise, and that's what I value.</p>
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	<p>I really value the phone that says, I'm struggling with this, or School Council is doing this. That was very strong then, and that's probably because as principals, we were all of the same era.</p> <p>the network was strong because we all wanted to be there and the principals were all the same era. We all <i>got</i> each other.</p> <p>I loved seeing colleagues. I loved the round table discussion which was vibrant people could talk openly, definitely about what was going on in their school.</p> <p>the caliber of the principals in our network was very, very high and people had great respect for each other's schools and what was going in there. There was only one agenda, to be supportive and respectful of each other.</p> <p>However there were also schools that saw themselves as maybe above other schools and they had a bit of a buy-out of being involved.</p>
Regional Network Leader and the regional network structure	<p>We had a clear, Regional Network Leader, who had personal contact with principals throughout the year, more than once a year, and they we're very easy to contact, they understood the needs of all of the schools and were very available to you if you needed them.</p>

	<p>I'm not sure that there was a lot of leadership in that role, in fact , really I have very rarely seen, in that period, the role of the network leader as a leader, that's the ones I've had, I've only seen their role as managers or deliverers of information from the government and the priorities of the day.</p> <p>ultimately, it came down to and to the nature of the various principals in the network and their view of what their role in the network should be. There are some principals who go into the network and want to commit themselves to the greatest good for the greatest number.</p> <p>I don't think the Regional Network Leaders, the Regional Network Leaders that I have seen, have played a leadership role and I think there is a great disparity between the role - the clarity around the expectation that principals would have of them being leaders rather than managers. I really haven't seen, as I said, leadership coming from them.</p> <p>the Regional Network Leader has got to galvanize everybody so that those who have been around for a long time don't just say this is just another new thing coming into the Department and we'll ignore it and go about doing what we have always done, and new principals do need a lot of guidance, support and visits to enable them to understand and unpack. We did a lot of that at the network meetings. So I think they acted more as facilitators.</p>
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	<p>A conduit, not a leader. (<i>referring to the RNL role</i>) As a conduit, it was the transformation of information from the top. Again, I think they were able to deliver shared data to the network that may have been generated, but again, the role was clearly not one of leadership.</p> <p>RESEARCHER: So where was the leadership in the network. Where did that come from (pause) or was it there?</p> <p>LAURA: Yes. I think in that period of time there were a lot of highly motivated principals who had been in their role for quite a long time so they were able to (pause) I think we had more consistent levels of experience in principalship at that time, and now many have gone and we have many assistant principals and principals in acting roles so I think it (<i>leadership</i>) was motivated from within the network.</p> <p>RESEARCHER: So, the resources fed into the network at the time, like Literacy and Numeracy coaches and a coordinator or a leader of the network responsible for a smaller number of school, do you feel that helped you in your role?</p> <p>LAURA: Definitely. I think it helped. Yes I do. I do. We need to have that. I would</p> <p>RESEARCHER: So do you think that within a network there is value in having a leader designated to that role?</p> <p>LAURA: Yes. Yes. More so than ever because of the change of generational, for example, I've got a young assistant principal who is very confident, but he doesn't know what he doesn't know.</p>
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	<p>LAURA: I suppose I've always had confidence in the work that I am doing in my school and the people around me, and the role of the network leader has been to have a strong conversation around what's happening in my school and the direction it was going in, and I suppose that person played more of checklist role for me. Have you thought of? Please make sure that this is happening. That was more the tone of the conversation.</p> <p>I've never felt intimidated.</p> <p>I think that the conversation at the network level was focused on the important things around being in a network, focused around student outcomes.</p> <p>knowing that the Regional Network Leader was going to be at the meeting every time was a reassuring point, if you wanted to talk, as a network, about something that was happening at the region you could do that, the person was physically there, that's not the case now. The regional director didn't come to every meeting so I think the Regional Network Leader was important in being able to take information straight back, and then get back to principals immediately. But there was a lot to get back to because we had a clear agenda. purpose of the networks and I think maybe the network strategic plan and what is a network about has been lost.</p>
System accountability	I'm not so sure whether the agenda of pure accountability was necessarily a positive one. I think we

	<p>moved from understanding that it was okay to talk about your role as a principal and the issues that you had in your school, to be purely driven by student outcomes.</p> <p>We're battling the notion of a British leagues table where results of your school's data were put up at the network and the notion of the best schools and that schools were plotted against each other, came in around that period when it was very much based around accountability. Accountability, for everything.</p> <p>Some schools, on the down side were identified as not performing, but as a network we handled that very well, but I'm not sure how individual schools felt about that. You were glad though when the data went up that you were somewhere in the middle or above state average. I don't think that was a very healthy period putting schools up against each other.</p> <p>the agenda was around accountability as student outcomes</p> <p>we had just moved into a highly accountable period with student outcomes</p> <p>RESEARCHER: Can you talk about the way data was used in the network? Before when we were talking about accountability, and schools were compared by their data you said you felt that was not a good way to go.</p> <p>LAURA: No. It was about: look at this school, there</p>
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	<p>data is way up there, let's all go and look at this school, which is not a good fit for everyone.</p>
<p>Systems thinking, alignment and direction from the Centre</p>	<p>we are educators in the state education system, there is a system in place and we are committed to it and we want it to be the best it can be.</p> <p>when we were developing strategic plans I think we were still doing it <i>for</i> the Department, so that they were accountable to those above them. However in that time we did have some very strong educational leadership coming through from the government, the e-learning, the e5 model.</p> <p>The leadership came from Darrell Fraser, from the secretary, from the government</p> <p>there was a clear articulated and documented vision around what education should look like in a school and who the stakeholders should be and how to involve them in the development of those</p> <p>understanding the importance of understanding the strategic plan in the school and the importance of having all stakeholders engaged in the development of the school strategic plan.</p> <p>We had done Early years and Middle Years programs that hadn't changed (pause) that actually didn't lead to</p>

	<p>improved student learning outcomes and we absolutely have to address what we are here for, which is to improve student learning outcomes, so that was pretty much the clear agenda</p> <p>the government's clear agenda of the Blueprint and all the resources that went with the Blueprint, the regional structures that allowed us to access coaches and consultants, either physically in your school or only a phone call away.</p> <p>The looking out, the inspiration for principals to look beyond their schools, to actually say we are in a network and there are other schools in the network doing great things and we have an opportunity to visit them, and find out what they are doing, was a very open period of time</p>
Feelings of excitement about that time of educational reform	<p>there was also this almost charismatic kind of change going on that enveloped us all.</p> <p>I think we were all very excited to see that there was a Blueprint So I think the strategy at the regional level, also I think was inspirational in terms of the sense of understanding the importance of understanding the strategic plan in the school and the importance of having all stakeholders engaged in the development of the school strategic plan.</p>

	<p>because it was exciting to come and explore and have those book club meetings around “ Leadership on the Line” the book that you have got there</p> <p>I think it was a highly charged period educationally.</p> <p>It was high energy because the government had a high challenging agenda, that we all wanted our schools to be achieving the best for our schools.</p> <p>there was a vision in place, a really clear one, around retention in secondary colleges and we were also looking at that time P-12 and special schools, we weren't just focusing on one area. We were very much one. The fact that we had secondary school principals, special school principals and primaries attending the one meeting and people very rarely missed a meeting because we were talking about the same kinds of things around how to engage students, how can we best deliver in all of our school, high quality programs in all our schools.</p> <p>to look back into that period and see a government that had a really clear educational vision, that was backed up by resources at the regional level to then come to network meetings and share those, the vision and to share the documentation that was coming through and generate discussion among the principals, was really, really excellent.</p>
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	<p>We were almost overly inundated with documentation, as you have some of it spread out in front of you, for a young principal, and even for an experienced principal there was a lot to unpack in that time. Fantastic. It was probably, in my time, the best period as a principal because of the educational vision. The blueprint was fantastic.</p> <p>it was a highly charged time.</p>
Knowledge creation and capacity-building	<p>RESEARCHER: So you saw the network as a learning organization?</p> <p>LAURA: Yes. I did. It also created opportunities for wider discussion. They were platforms to maybe have a lunch with other principals around a common theme, the book club would then generate discussion around issues in your own schools. And then from those discussions you may have followed up with other principals. Yes, I think they generated good educational discourse.</p> <p>there were some really excellent educational academics around, that assisted with the driving of taking principals to higher order thinking. I think principals can get very caught in the day-to-day technical aspects of their leadership and this really helped us all to focus on educational leadership and the core purpose of our role, which is around student outcomes and student learning and driving student engagement in learning.</p>

	<p>there was so much documentation, such clear vision, the Blueprint was there, the E5 was there, we also had the opportunity as principals to develop through despite the ridiculous name and the political agenda that was attached to it, the High Performing Principals program afforded me probably the best professional learning I have had in 20 years being in the Evolving Vision program at Harvard.</p> <p>RESEARCHER: So there was a lot of knowledge creation through the system?</p> <p>LAURA: Oh absolutely! Total knowledge creation. We were learning new things. The whole notion of change; principals understanding the importance of change; opening our minds to the world. Richard Elmore, other top academics. It brought principals to the understanding that they needed to be lifelong learners themselves and to continue to develop their own professional knowledge and skills as well as their teachers.</p>
Support, recognition and affirmation	<p>We had the coaches coming in, Literacy and numeracy coaches. So there was a lot of funding that went in there as well.</p> <p>principals were valued there were a lot of resources put into their professional development.</p> <p>And I know this is a personal thing, but I have never felt valued at a network level or from a regional level.</p> <p>as you get older you feel that your views (pause) you</p>

	<p>don't want to (pause) because I used to speak quite a lot at network meetings, you also don't want to be seen as a big mouth or a loud mouth and I know my views, well I felt my views were never respected by people who were in those network meetings that came from the region.</p> <p>There is no Blueprint agenda. Sink or swim on your own.</p> <p>RESEARCHER: So do you feel that because there was someone attached to look after 25 schools rather than 60, that was an important thing to facilitate contact?</p> <p>LAURA: Definitely. Even if just for some affirmation</p> <p>it's still nice to speak to someone one on one, about what you are doing and get some affirmation.</p> <p>I've felt disappointed in knowing that I have been discarded for such a long time, ever to be seen at any level as being worthy of being consulted. And that's how I felt for a long time. So now I found my own strengths and the school is thriving.</p> <p>my perception around lack of acknowledgement that I was doing anything right at all, no acknowledgement at all, and at times absolute exclusion.</p> <p>Then you wonder what it is you are lacking...probably being a yes person is one of them,</p>
Mandated network	

membership	<p>RESEARCHER: Membership was mandatory though. Did that bother you Did you ever feel obligated?</p> <p>LAURA: Never. Because I loved it. I wanted to go. Which is different to now as I sit here with you. It was high energy because the government had a high challenging agenda, that we all wanted our schools to be achieving the best for our schools.</p>
Network projects and initiatives	<p>LAURA: I thought they were horrendous, personally (<i>Instructional Rounds</i>)</p> <p>RESEARCHER: So that was a particular project that belonged to your network?</p> <p>LAURA: Yes it was...well, a lot of networks at the time. Ours, particularly, yes.</p> <p>RESEARCHER: So did you participate in Instructional Rounds?</p> <p>LAURA: I did.</p> <p>RESEARCHER: Tell me about that.</p> <p>LAURA: I found it a tokenistic process. I think to go into a school and look at a problem of practice, which is a deficit model, into another school, to observe teachers that we didn't know, and to look at what the teacher was saying, what the children were saying, was tokenistic and frankly, embarrassing. I think we could have looked at more of the development of peer coaching, development of the trust and relationships that we need to have in our own schools rather than to look at another school.</p> <p>And the role of the Regional Network Leader at the time was to get you out and go into other schools and it absolutely a tick the box thing because <i>they</i> were being pressured into doing that. I felt that was imposed on all</p>

	<p>of us. I know it was meant to be optional but there was a sense that you were pretty out on the edge, if you didn't do it. (<i>with regard to Instructional Rounds</i>)</p> <p>Knowing what I know now about the importance of building trust and having important and professional forms of reciprocal feedback with the staff, I don't think that was a good model at all. However, we learnt from it, to be better than that. (<i>Instructional Rounds</i>)</p>
Network executive and network governance	<p>I think the executive has always been very important. It's really important for a small group of people to go away, take on board the views that are expressed at a network meeting and unpack it.</p> <p>So yes, I think the executive played a very important part, we were all on the same page because there was a vision.</p>
Principal role and autonomy	<p>of course, zones came in and schools were marketing.</p> <p>my commitment and passion for state education has never, ever waived.</p> <p>I have loved every day</p>
Policy changes and perceived arbitrary nature of decision-making	<p>there has certainly been a change in the way networks operate and that has been largely due to changes in government and the emphasis that different governments have had on the purpose of the network. So if we go</p>

	<p>back to a few years ago pre Liberal government I think the networks were still very strong</p> <p>The destruction of those documents and the complete, what's the word (pause) abandonment of those documents once the new government came in was one of the greatest tragedies that happened in education.</p> <p>There were, Literacy and Numeracy networks, which were good. But now we see really no resources put into our teachers or networks.</p> <p>There was a clear message about a new generation of people taking up positions and that's fine, however, it's the blind leading the blind. Even to run a portfolio around student wellbeing with an assistant principal or someone who has been in the role for a very little amount of time, I think is impacting on the quality of the conversations and again, the leadership.</p>
Self-forming networks	<p>I have the IB network and in a different position, I do have a lot of strong networks and use them</p> <p>I'm now and have been since 2010, part of an IB network that is thriving and growing and fully focused on an educational vision</p>
Excesses of the system/favoritism or nepotism	<p>I still have a small degree of cynicism, even as we go through the IBAC situation at the moment. There were clearly people, while this period was deemed to be a highly consultative period, the government had many, many consultative processes, of course the chairperson of the network clearly needed to be at the regional and state level, to pass on information, that was great, I</p>

	<p>think that was fantastic, and they were totally committed to making sure the views of the network were passed through.</p> <p>But it was very much a boys network, it has come to light, people were tapped on the shoulder and people who were seen to be maybe too mouthy were overlooked. We clearly saw the same people being tapped on the shoulder and that was under Darrell Fraser and although it was a visionary period it was also such a boys network and girls network.</p> <p>I think there was a systematic sense of boys' network and girls' network, where people were chosen to be in the inner circle and they continued to be, over decades. So it didn't matter which government was in.</p> <p>RESEARCHER: Within that period we are talking about as well, people were chosen ones?</p> <p>LAURA: Oh yes, it was continuous. Constant.</p>
Sense of abandonment or alienation	<p>I think (pause) you don't know what you've got until it's gone, and the last few years we have seen in our network, a deterioration in numbers, a lack of vision educationally, we've had a rotating number of (pause) whatever they are called now. (<i>Referring to Senior Advisers</i>) It has been disastrous.</p> <p>From my perspective I've lost motivation to go. So I think the fact that we don't have it now</p> <p>The depletion of resources has been astronomical and the regional level has been decimated.</p>

	<p>Now the Mid cycle review process involves meeting together in a group and discussing our work, I don't think that the best way and I know it's been done because there is a lack of resources. The decimation of literacy support at the region, EAL, Maths, coaches, they took away the core needs of schools, which is about having support in your schools.</p> <p>resources that have been taken away from the regional level have absolutely impacted on the network.</p> <p>I would like to ring someone at the network now but there is nobody.</p> <p>I mean attendance now at a network meeting would be around 25% if you're lucky, on a good day maybe 50 (<i>principals and assistant principals</i>). There are some people you never see, they do not come. Now is that because (pause) why? pause) I don't know, the network is not (pause) the network is suffering from inexperienced people running portfolios.</p> <p>We are going through a period of principal retirement and attrition and the effect of that is probably quite evident because there is not a Regional Network Leader or strong Regional Network Leadership coming through to guide that.</p> <p>And I think the vacuum in educational leadership and the depletion of regional resources in the last few years, has led to I think, a much weaker sense of the network.</p>
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	<p>Plus we have young leaders who don't have the experience or the understanding of the purpose of the networks and I think maybe the network strategic plan and what is a network about has been lost.</p>
<p>Engagement with system generated documents e.g. E5, Developmental Framework for School Leaders, School Improvement: A Theory of Action, Principal Readings, Network Strategic Plan.</p>	<p>The Effective Schools Model. I still use the effective schools model today. It's a strong visual and practical model for school councils to understand, for teachers to understand and to use it to articulate the vision, the principal performance development was really around the Leadership Development Framework where you could see the areas to strengthen, areas you needed to build on. The E5 Instructional model was a fantastic model because our school is now an IB school, that was the basis on which we were able to articulate an inquiry-based model of learning.</p>
<p>Accurately remembering the regional network structure.</p>	<p>RESEARCHER: Are you talking about the structure that was in place from October 2008 to the end of June 2012?</p> <p>LAURA: Yes. Is that the period you are talking about?</p> <p>RESEARCHER: Yes. That's the period I'm talking about.</p> <p>So can I just ask you, you talked a lot about the trust and accessibility and that sort of thing... How was that period different from what went before? Do you remember what it was like before that?</p> <p>LAURA: Umm (pause) What did we have before that?</p> <p>RESEARCHER: Well there were different sorts of leaders but the networks were bigger and I don't think there was the same agenda of school improvement.</p> <p>LAURA: No, there probably wasn't.</p>

	<p>The Regional Network Leader coming in now, tells you what they don't know.</p> <p>RESEARCHER: So you're talking about the Senior Adviser role now?</p> <p>LAURA: Yes. The Senior Adviser role.</p>
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Sample document of combined extracts which illustrate a particular theme:

Opportunities arising from the change to Regional Networks.

BELINDA: So in terms of my own personal growth I felt tremendous opportunities to show that I could not only learn but contribute to the System more broadly, so I did.

The discussions happening now, on team teaching, about using flexible spaces, professional learning communities, those were the sorts of things that weren't talked about before the regional networks. That's what we talk about now. And that was the vision for the network and how we move forwards.

But it certainly broadened my leadership and gave me lots of ideas in my own school and I was trying to build leadership capacity in my school.

ELIZA: It gave me experience of other schools, it developed me as a leader, whereas in the previous structure, I just organised the meetings and got speakers and tried be supportive.

But now it was all directed against leadership development principal capacity in the areas of expectation; you supported the development of new principals starting with their technical skills. It developed me as a leader within the network. We had the ability to join a coaching program.

JENNIE: Well, the professional dialogue, being able to talk to people about how they would do particular things, how they would manage what the System wanted them to do. I could take that back, but in terms of doing the work, it was always very different back at my school.

LAURA: It also created opportunities for wider discussion. They were platforms to maybe have a lunch with other principals around a common theme, the book club would then generate discussion around issues in your own schools. And then, from those discussions you may have followed up with other principals. Yes, I think they generated good educational discourse.

MELISSA: There was always a lot of professional sharing and encouragement. All of the principals who went on study tours shared their learning at the network.

MELVIN: Yes, you had access to the data and were able to analyse that as you went along. But it was network data as well; it was cross sector. We also got to know about the secondaries and the expectations of VCE and VCAL, and the issues with the reduced funding later; it gave us a broader picture of other sectors.

Huge opportunity to get outside your own neighbourhood and look at the same struggles in a different context, it really opened your eyes.

ROBERT: I thought those three years were very good because there was a definite focus on sharing ideas and a clear idea on improving learning, not only in your own school, but in the network schools as well.

The network also had various coaches attached to it but this school was seen as way too high performing to apply for a coach, but we used to get the coaches coming to talk to the teaching and learning group and they had a leadership role in providing the PD, so they got to know everyone as well.

Particularly those first two years it got staff from this school out and into other schools - there were many more opportunities for that than there are now.

MELVIN: it was a very innovative time, the most focused on education, talking about what education was and how we could improve it.

I felt an enormous sense of trust existed, mutual trust, and the network leader didn't go on every round but came as a participant sometimes [*referring to Instructional Rounds*].

PAUL: The regional network structure helped keep us informed and I'd turn up to a meeting and think, what am I going to learn today? Most of those sessions, we were learning new things.

It did cause principals to talk to each other a lot more and we are still reaping the benefits of that.

SAM: It helped me to be a better principal. By doing *Instructional Rounds*, by having Sergioivanni there, by bringing in keynote speakers to talk to the whole network and we could bring in our assistant principals and literacy coordinators and so on. By having a focus on the data and what it was telling us, so you could develop your own skills in that area.

Appendix B . Journal Extract

Process of analysis and management of transcripts. Prior to the commencement of interviews a table showing the list of interviewees and their allocated codes was created as a confidential file. The table indicated the type of school, years of principalship at the time of the interview, date of interview, gender of the participant and the name of the regional network. The purpose of this table was to ensure there was a cross-section of principals and types of schools, gender balance and network balance before the interviews commenced. Later these principals will be allocated pseudonyms.

This table was later amended to remove identifying details so that the table could be used as a workable checklist for the process of analysis. As it was decided to use a colour code to facilitate the process, the colour codes were added and an alphabetical listing given to the regional network that the principal had been a member of. There were 9 regional networks in the Southern Metropolitan Region (SMR) at that time. Participants are drawn from 5 of these regional networks.

Code	Colour Code	Years as Principal	Gender	School Type	Network	Interview Date
P1	Aqua	20	F	Primary	A	17.9.15
P2	Emerald	10	F	P-12	B	6.10.15
P3	Orange	15	M	Primary	C	7.10.15
P4	Red	20	F	P-12	B	12.10.15
P5	Yellow	12	M	Secondary	D	15.10.15
P6	Grey	25	M	Primary		20.10.15
P7	Buff	10+	F	SDS	B	23.10.15
P8	Light Green	15+	F	Primary	A	27.10.15
P9	Pink	20	M	Primary	C	6.11.15
P10	Light Blue	15+	M	Primary	E	13.11.15

After carefully transcribing the interviews from the recordings and saving them as individual files, I sent a copy of each transcript to the individual participant for member checking.

Individual transcripts were read carefully for a sense of emergent themes. These themes were considered but not listed on that first reading. The 10 transcripts were compiled into one combined document so that on an initial reading, an overall feel for emerging themes could be noted. A list of these initial, emergent themes was compiled as a starting point for re-visiting the individual transcripts. While it is understood that these initial emergent themes will be refined and re-phrased, the initial list is included here.

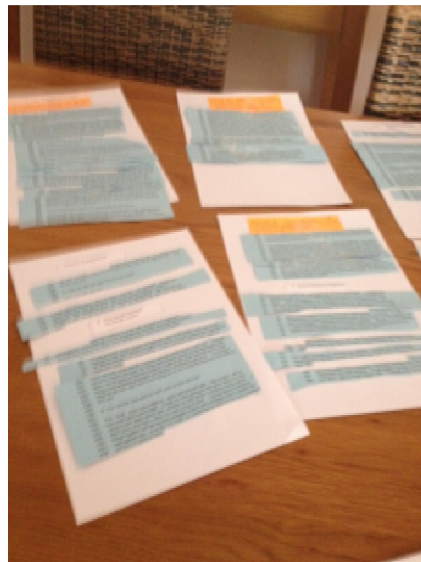
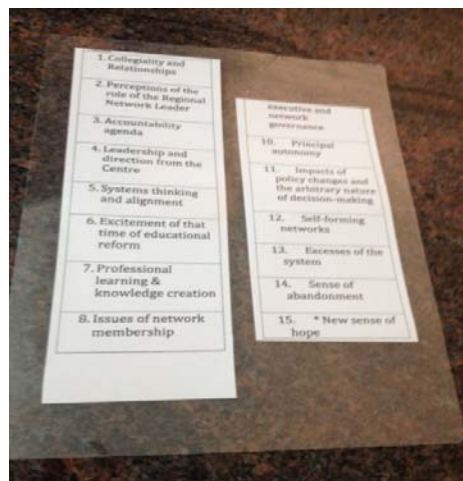
Initial theme list.

1. Collegiality and Relationships
2. Perceptions of the role of the Regional Network Leader
3. Accountability agenda
4. Leadership and direction from the Centre
5. Systems Thinking and alignment
6. Excitement of that time of educational reform
7. Professional learning & knowledge creation
8. Issues of network membership
9. The Network Executive and network governance
10. Network projects & initiatives
11. Principal autonomy
12. Impacts of policy changes and the arbitrary nature of decision-making
13. Self-forming networks

14. Excesses of the System

15. Sense of abandonment

Each individual transcript was then revisited in light of the initial list of emergent themes. At this time, transcripts were reformatted to show line numbers as this strategy would assist with locating sections of text to be attributed to a particular theme. It was at this stage that individual transcripts were printed off on coloured paper according to their allocated code .



The first transcript to be re-visited was Transcript 10. This was chosen as a starting point because the researcher recalled that the participant was particularly articulate in expressing ideas related to emergent themes. This was considered to be a suitable starting point for this stage of the analysis.

A table was developed and compiled of extracts from Transcript 10 that matched the identified themes. This table format will be used to re-visit each of the individual transcripts to provide an accurate and systematic record of how extracts from the texts match the emergent themes. New themes that emerge from any individual transcripts are indicated with an asterisk. *New sense of hope*, for example, was a new theme that emerged in Transcript 10 as shown in the first photo in the series above.

The snapshot extract from the document below shows the process for transferring extracts from transcripts to matching themes in a table.

Transcript 10	Themes	Extracts from Transcript that matches themes
	1. Collegiality and Relationships	<p>P10: you weren't just left to your own devices. You were actually part of a team looking at things...</p> <p>P10: then we started doing instructional rounds...the focus of our meetings became instructional rounds, that meant that we were working together and <i>that</i> built collegiality. We were working together on a common goal and that was a great way to develop a network, as opposed to: Let's go to the pub and have a drink together. ...that's a different sort of approach saying: Look, there's some important work we need to do together, let's see if we can work together and get it done.</p>

An additional color-coding step of classifying transcript extracts by examining them through three additional lenses, will be outlined. The purpose is to gain further insights into the perceptions of principals of the regional network structure, through the application of an educational theoretical overlay to the phenomenological, analytical approach of van Manen’s thematic units, previously

discussed in the Methodology. This will be achieved through the imposition of three theoretical lenses to the emergent transcript themes.

These are:

Lens 1: (BLUE) Professional Capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012)

Lens 2: (RED) Governance. Through the adaptation of Moore and Khagram's strategic triangle (2004; 1997) linking legitimacy and support, public value and operational capability.

Lens 3: (GREEN) Systems Thinking: the fifth discipline (Senge, 2006).

These lenses, which have all been outlined in the literature review, will now be re-visited.

Lens 1: Professional Capital. The term, Capital, is not something that educational leaders would immediately be drawn to in describing their field of expertise, as this term is usually more compatible with business and economics. It is about adding value to net worth; making an investment for a return. Nevertheless, Hargreaves and Fullan have used this term to link it with the building of net worth and adding value within education systems. They identify three forms of capital that make up the umbrella concept of Professional Capital. These are human capital (individual skill and talent); social capital (the collective power of the group); and decisional capital (the expert knowledge and experience developed over many years that leads to the most appropriate judgments about what learners need. In returning to the concept of Professional Capital that was touched upon in the literature review. A Professional Capital policies and practices approach to educational improvement, recognises that the expertise of teachers individually and collectively make a difference to student learning and achievement

In a Professional Capital approach, collective capacity and expertise is built through investment by the System in both personnel and programs.

Lens 2 : Governance. In considering the perceptions of principals of influence and power of the Executive committee in the governance structure of the regional networks, I have adapted Moore and Khagram's strategic triangle (2004, p. 3) that links public value, the operational capability of a public service structure, with how that structure gains its legitimacy and support. In expanding on the concept of public value as a legitimising aspect of government agencies and departments, Moore and Khagram argue that the goal of government managers is to "create public (social) value" in the same way that private managers create economic value through trading their goods and services in markets. Stakeholders need to see value in the work of public organisations if they are to give their support to the work at hand, such as lobby groups for hospitals or schools. Government organisations rely on public value to gain their legitimacy and support to authorise their actions and provide them with the resources they need to operate, and this becomes a key feature in determining their governance arrangements. When looking specifically at the governance of regional networks, this lens is relevant in relation to how components of this strategic triangle model, impact on the operations and mandate for decision-making in the regional network context. In this case, the stakeholders are the member principals, their schools and their communities. By supporting and endorsing the role of the Executive and its functions, the principals in the network, give the management structure its public value and operational capability. While operational capability and public value are also superimposed by the System through its facilitation of the Executive structure by its official recognition of it, the true endorsement of the power of the Executive comes from the

member principals of the regional network who, through their endorsement and support of it, authorise the environment of the Executive and the regional network, through honouring its governance structure and giving it value.

Lens 3: Systems Thinking: the fifth discipline (Senge, 2006). Senge's (2006) Systems Thinking around learning organisations, is particularly relevant in the context of team building which is so critical to the effectiveness of Education Networks. Senge (2006) distinguishes team learning as a very specific form of learning that allows for rigorous exchange of ideas in a respectful and supportive environment. When teams are learning, not only are they producing extraordinary results, but individual members are growing. Senge believes that unless teams can learn, organisations cannot learn. Thus learning exchange, is the essential component of capacity-building in Education Networks.

Transcripts will be sent to an independent person for a broad look to see whether they pick up any additional themes. In preparation for this, the combined transcripts were again surveyed by the researcher. On this reading (03.12.15) additional themes were identified. These are:

- Network projects and initiatives
- Scepticism of new policy directions (Education State Oct. 2015)
- Accurately remembering the regional network structure.
- Competition between network schools
- Opportunities thrown up by the RN structure

The new list is as follows:

List as at 04.12.15

Emergent themes in transcripts.

- Collegiality and Relationships
- Perceptions of the role of the Regional Network Leader
- Purpose of the regional network structure
- Accountability agenda
- Leadership and direction from the Centre
- Systems Thinking and alignment
- Excitement of that time of educational reform
- Professional learning & knowledge creation
- Support, and the need for affirmation recognition
- Issues of mandated network membership
- Network projects & initiatives
- The Network Executive and network governance
- Principal autonomy & failure to toe the line
- Impacts of policy changes and the arbitrary nature of decision-making
- Self-forming networks
- Excesses of the System/Favouritism or nepotism
- Sense of abandonment
- New sense of hope with new policy directions
- Scepticism about new policy directions
- Accurately remembering the structure.
- Feelings of alienation from the System
- Competition between network schools
- Other influences on school improvement at the time e.g. National Partnerships

- Opportunities thrown up by the change to regional networks

On 05.12.15 the themes were again revised as there seemed to be overlap. Some themes were re-phrased and combined. The new list totalled 21 themes instead of 24. I think this will be more manageable at this stage in the process. The new list is as follows:

- Collegiality and Relationships
- Role of the Regional Network Leader & purpose of the regional network structure
- System accountability
- Systems Thinking, alignment and direction from the Centre
- Feelings of excitement about that time of educational reform
- Professional learning & knowledge creation
- Support, recognition & affirmation
- Issues to do with mandated network membership
- Network projects & initiatives
- Network Executive and network governance
- Principal autonomy
- Impacts of policy changes and the arbitrary nature of decision-making
- Self-forming networks
- Excesses of the System/favouritism or nepotism
- Sense of abandonment or alienation
- New sense of hope with new policy directions (Education State 2015)
- Scepticism about new policy directions (Education State 2015)

- Accurately remembering the regional network structure.
- Competition between network schools
- Other influences on school improvement at the time (e.g. Federal funding)
- Opportunities arising from the change to regional networks

Pseudonyms were also allocated to participants at this stage to make the voices more personalised. These are:

Initial Code	Pseudonym
P1	Laura
P2	Belinda
P3	Paul
P4	Eliza
P5	Martin
P6	Robert
P7	Jennie
P8	Melissa
P9	Melvin
P10	Sam

30.12.15. Continue to review and consolidate themes. Have grouped themes related to each other so they logically follow on in the list. New list has 21 themes.

THEMES at 30.12.15

- Collegiality and Relationships
- Regional Network Leader & the regional network structure
- Mandated network membership
- Network projects & initiatives
- Network Executive and network governance
- Value of the network strategic plan

- Self-forming networks
- Domination of previous networks by long-standing members
- Accurately remembering the regional network structure.
- Feelings of excitement about that time of educational reform
- Systems Thinking, alignment & direction from the Centre
- System Accountability
- Knowledge creation & capacity-building
- Other influences that impacted on the school improvement agenda
- Engagement with system generated documents e.g. E5, Developmental Framework for School Leaders, School Improvement: A Theory of Action, Principal Readings.
- Support, recognition & affirmation
- Principal role & autonomy
- Policy changes & perceived arbitrary nature of decision-making
- Excesses of the System/favouritism or nepotism
- Sense of abandonment or alienation
- Perceptions of new policy directions (Education State 2015)

Have re-visited the three transcripts already analysed, to align with this. It is still possible other themes will emerge as I continue to look at the identified themes and continue to re-visit the language in the transcripts. Some themes may stand outside the parameters of the study and will need to be set aside.

30 January 2016: Wrote my own lived experience story as an RNL at that time.

31 January 2016. Have begun reconstructing the individual transcripts as stories that capture the essence of the experience. Should make an interesting juxtaposition with RNL story. Will then examine for common themes.

2 Feb 16: Collating all participants demonstrating the same theme into the one table. e.g. all Collegiality & Relationships comments from all participants in the one table. Each theme to have its own combined table.

Appendix C. Ethics Approvals



Human Research Ethics Committee Committee Approval Form

Principal Investigator/Supervisor: Dr Philip Riley

Co-Investigators:

Student Researcher: : Judith Gurvich

Ethics approval has been granted for the following project:

PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF REGIONAL NETWORKS: AN AMBITIOUS ATTEMPT AT SYSTEM WIDE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT?

for the period: 30/09/2016

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Register Number: 2015-166E

Special Condition/s of Approval

Prior to commencement of your research, the following permissions are required to be submitted to the ACU HREC:

- Approval from the Victorian Department of Education and Training will be sought concurrently, as I will be interviewing principals of government schools.

The data collection of your project has received ethical clearance but the decision and authority to commence may be dependent on factors beyond the remit of the ethics review process and approval is subject to ratification at the next available Committee meeting. The Chief Investigator is responsible for ensuring that outstanding permission letters are obtained, interview/survey questions, if relevant, and a copy forwarded to ACU HREC before any data collection can occur. Failure to provide outstanding documents to the ACU HREC before data collection commences is in breach of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research. Further, this approval is only valid as long as approved procedures are followed.

Clinical Trials: You are required to register it in a publicly accessible trials registry prior to enrolment of the first participant (e.g. Australian New Zealand Clinical Trials Registry <http://www.anzctr.org.au/>) as a condition of ethics approval.

It is the Principal Investigators / Supervisors responsibility to ensure that:

1. All serious and unexpected adverse events should be reported to the HREC with 72 hours.
2. Any changes to the protocol must be reviewed by the HREC by submitting a Modification/Change to Protocol Form prior to the research commencing or continuing. <http://research.acu.edu.au/researcher-support/integrity-and-ethics/>
3. Progress reports are to be submitted on an annual basis. <http://research.acu.edu.au/researcher-support/integrity-and-ethics/>
4. All research participants are to be provided with a Participant Information Letter and consent form, unless otherwise agreed by the Committee.
5. Protocols can be extended for a maximum of five (5) years after which a new application must be submitted. (The five year limit on renewal of approvals allows the Committee to fully re-review research in an environment where legislation, guidelines and requirements are continually changing, for example, new child protection and privacy laws).

Researchers must immediately report to HREC any matter that might affect the ethical acceptability of the protocol eg: changes to protocols or unforeseen circumstances or adverse effects on participants.



Signed:

Date:09/09/2015.....

(Research Services Officer, Australian Catholic University, Tel: 02 9739 2646)



Department of Education & Training

Strategy & Review Group

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2015 002801

Ms Judith Gurvich
Australian Catholic University
115 Victoria Parade
FITZROY 3065

Dear Ms Gurvich

Thank you for your application of 7 July 2015 in which you request permission to conduct research in Victorian government schools titled *Principals' Perceptions of Regional Networks*.

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of the information you have provided your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the conditions detailed below.

1. The research is conducted in accordance with the final documentation you provided to the Department of Education and Training.
2. . Separate approval for the research needs to be sought from school principals. This is to be supported by the Department of Education and Training approved documentation and, if applicable, the letter of approval from a relevant and formally constituted Human Research Ethics Committee.
3. The project is commenced within 12 months of this approval letter and any extensions or variations to your study, including those requested by an ethics committee must be submitted to the Department of Education and Training for its consideration before you proceed.
4. As a matter of courtesy, you advise the relevant Regional Director of the schools or governing body of the early childhood settings that you intend to approach. An outline of your research and a copy of this letter should be provided to the Regional Director or governing body.
5. You acknowledge the support of the Department of Education Training in any publications arising from the research.
6. The Research Agreement conditions, which include the reporting requirements at the conclusion of your study, are upheld. A reminder will be sent for reports not submitted by the study's indicative completion date.

I wish you well with your research. Should you have further questions on this matter, please contact Youla Michaels, Project Support Officer, Insights and Evidence Branch, by telephone on (03) 9637 2707 or by email at michaels.youla_v@edumail.vic.gov.au.

Yours sincerely



Megan Kerr
Manager
Strategic Evaluations and Evidence

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Appendix D. Interview Questions and Prompts

1. Can you speak about your experience as a member of a regional network?
Prompts:
 - i. Collegiality
 - ii. Autonomy
 - iii. Professional support
 - iv. Goal congruence
2. How did the network impact on your levels of professional knowledge?
Prompts:
 - a. Specific example a
 - b. Specific example b
3. How did network initiatives create knowledge?
 - a. Can you talk about an initiative that impacted on your professional knowledge?
4. One of the network's goals was to improve the System through alignment and capacity –building. How would you describe your experience of these goals?
 - a. In what ways did your use of data change as a result of being in the network?
5. Talk about aspects of the regional network that had relevance to your role.
6. We know that membership of, and participation in the regional network was an expectation by the System. Can you expand on your views on this aspect of the network?
 - a. Can you describe your level of participation in the network?
7. Outline your perception of the way leadership and coordination roles in the network.
 - a. How were they determined?
 - b. What was your experience with regard to this?
8. In what ways did being a member of the network influence the way that you approached your role as principal.
9. How did the network's strategic plan impact on your own school?
10. What did you value most and least about the regional network structure?