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Paradox in the lives and work of school principals

A jointly funded research project of the University of South Australian, the South Australian Primary Principals' Association (SAPPA) and the South Australian Secondary Principals' Association (SASPA).

FOREWORD

The role of principals in South Australia's public education system is as complex as it is rewarding. Leadership aspirants, once in steady supply, are now deterred from applying for principal vacancies by the complexity and high workload associated with the role. The longitudinal study into Principals' Health and Wellbeing conducted by Professor Philip Riley reinforces this view and recognises a range of factors impacting on current principals that present as a disincentive to principal aspirants.

Riley's research identifies multiple stressors impacting on the welfare of the nation's principals. From a workload perspective, his report regularly recommends to employing authorities that they should "either reduce the job demands or increase the support for principals to complete the job demands or, preferably, do both". In South Australia, apart from a 0.1 FTE teacher allocation provided to public education principals as a feature of the 2016 Award, there has been little done to improve the principal's lot during a time of increased accountability and diminished autonomy.

As well, principals' work is now constituted inside of a reform agenda that is increasingly under duress. School devolution policy is subsumed by a one-size-fits-all logic that, by definition, cannot account for local context. The impact of parental choice policies is increasingly viewed as detrimental to the public provision of schooling and is a contributing factor to the residualisation of many schools within the Department for Education system. Standardisation of curriculum is pushing teachers to take up highly scripted forms of pedagogy that seem unsuited to local needs, especially in schools serving high poverty communities. In addition, high stakes testing is increasingly open to allegations that it both undermines other alternative measures of good practice and pushes teachers towards narrow and unproductive definitions of what counts as literacy and numeracy, at a time when Australia really needs to be advancing a highly developed knowledge economy. All of these claims are contestable, but recent policy analysis strongly suggests that the reform agenda for Australian schooling is failing on two counts:

i) 'the performance of Australian students [has] declined at all levels of achievement compared to international benchmarks' (Gonski et al., 2018); and

ii) there is 'an unacceptable link between low levels of achievement and educational disadvantage, particularly among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds' (Parliament of Australia, 2014).

With this as our context, the South Australian Secondary Principals' Association (SASPA) and South Australian Primary Principals' Association (SAPPA), approached the University of South Australia in 2018 to arrange for Dr Chris Dolan to conduct research into the complexity of principal's work. We understood that there were a range of tensions for principals in fulfilling the dual roles of school community leader and system leader. By identifying these tensions, and deepening our understanding of their effect, we sought more detailed insights into the shaping of principals and their work inside of the current reform agenda and envisaged the surfacing of more hopeful possibilities for the future of our profession.

In our joint planning, Dr Dolan's research was designed around themes of tension, ambiguity and paradox. A mixed-methods approach was formulated involving distinct, but connected, qualitative and quantitative projects. Beginning with the qualitative project, a series of in-school interviews was conducted with 10 primary and 10 secondary principals in order to gather contextually rich data about the experiences and perspectives of individuals. Subsequently, in the quantitative project, all principal members of SAPPA and SASPA (i.e., primary, secondary and combined primary-secondary) were invited to complete a survey, with 180 principals responding. The combined data from this two-part research project was rich with information about the causes of the various ambiguities, contradictions and tensions in the work of contemporary principals, and strategies for how best to manage them.

Paradox in the lives and work of school principals is important research.

Foreword

Dr Dolan's findings highlight the various tensions faced by contemporary principals as they navigate the external and internal stressors of leading schools and being system leaders. In providing a deeper insight into "what is", his study illuminates the constitutive role that tension plays in the lives and work of principals. By extension, it highlights the heterogeneity of the principal cohort, underlines the importance of principal participation in a debate about the broader purposes of schooling and works as an antidote to idealised, narrow and homogenised depictions of who principals are and what they do. More ambitiously, *Paradox in the lives and work of school principals* signposts "what could be" for the profession; helping imagine what it would take to achieve a more participative and harmonised approach to how public education policy is conceived, settled and enacted, and how the role of the school principal could be reconceptualized.

We commend this research to you.

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Project overview

This research project sought to work into a gap in current thinking about school leadership by attending to more ambiguous, contradictory and uncertain readings instead of following more typical accounts of the influential work of school principals, desired leadership traits or instrumental measures of leader effectiveness.

The title of the project – *Paradox in the lives and work of school principals* – reflects an initial interest in the constitutive work of paradox. However associated ideas about tension, ambiguity and conflict assumed a greater prominence as the project proceeded, with the notion of *tension* emerging as not only a useful organiser of what principals do, but also as a pointer to major sources of anxiety and frustration, as influential in principal choices about the way they lead and decide, and as a constitutive force that shapes their conduct and identity.

The methodology for the project was devised in consultation with the various partner organisations – the University of South Australia (UniSA), the South Australian Primary Principals' Association (SAPPA) and the South Australian Secondary Principals' Associations (SASPA) ¬– as were related decisions about project design, timing, principal participation, stakeholder communication, milestones and planned outcomes. A mixed-methods approach was used to collect data. This data collection occurred as a two-part sequence involving, firstly, 'the qualitative study' based on the interview responses of 20 principals (10 primary and 10 secondary), and, secondly, 'the quantitative study' using a web-based survey made available to all principal members of SAPPA and SASPA. The following is a summary of observations from the two studies.

Observations from the research project

On being a principal

In response to an introductory question in the qualitative study about the experience of being a principal, a wide range of perceptions were gathered from interviewees. From the data, four broad categories of participant observations are summarised in Figure 1

Being influential: References to 'influence' were preferred over more explicit signifiers of principal power and control. Participants described a broad field of influence involving staff, students and community. They linked their personal influence to preferred styles of leadership and to contextual variables such as trust and confidence, and the capacity of the leader to understand local needs.

Being part of a community: Several participants claimed that community involvement contributes significantly to their positive perceptions of their work. Community connection claims also inferred an added responsibility and accountability, political possibilities in joining with the community and a heightened awareness of the need to manage the impressions their school is making on and in its community.

Having some agency and autonomy: The terms 'agency' and 'autonomy' were used by multiple participants to describe one of the keys to their job satisfaction. Responses were, however, often made with preconditions and qualifiers, with several principals acknowledging that the freedom or agency to which they lay claim is fashioned inside of – and sometimes despite – a broader requirement for compliance across the system.

Leading teaching and learning: Participants spoke about versions of the principalship tied up with theories of 'instructional' and 'educational' leadership, official documents describing the job and to the responsibility they feel for the learning outcomes of students. Data analysis revealed both a desire to be more deeply involved in leading teaching and learning and a range of impediments to this actually happening.

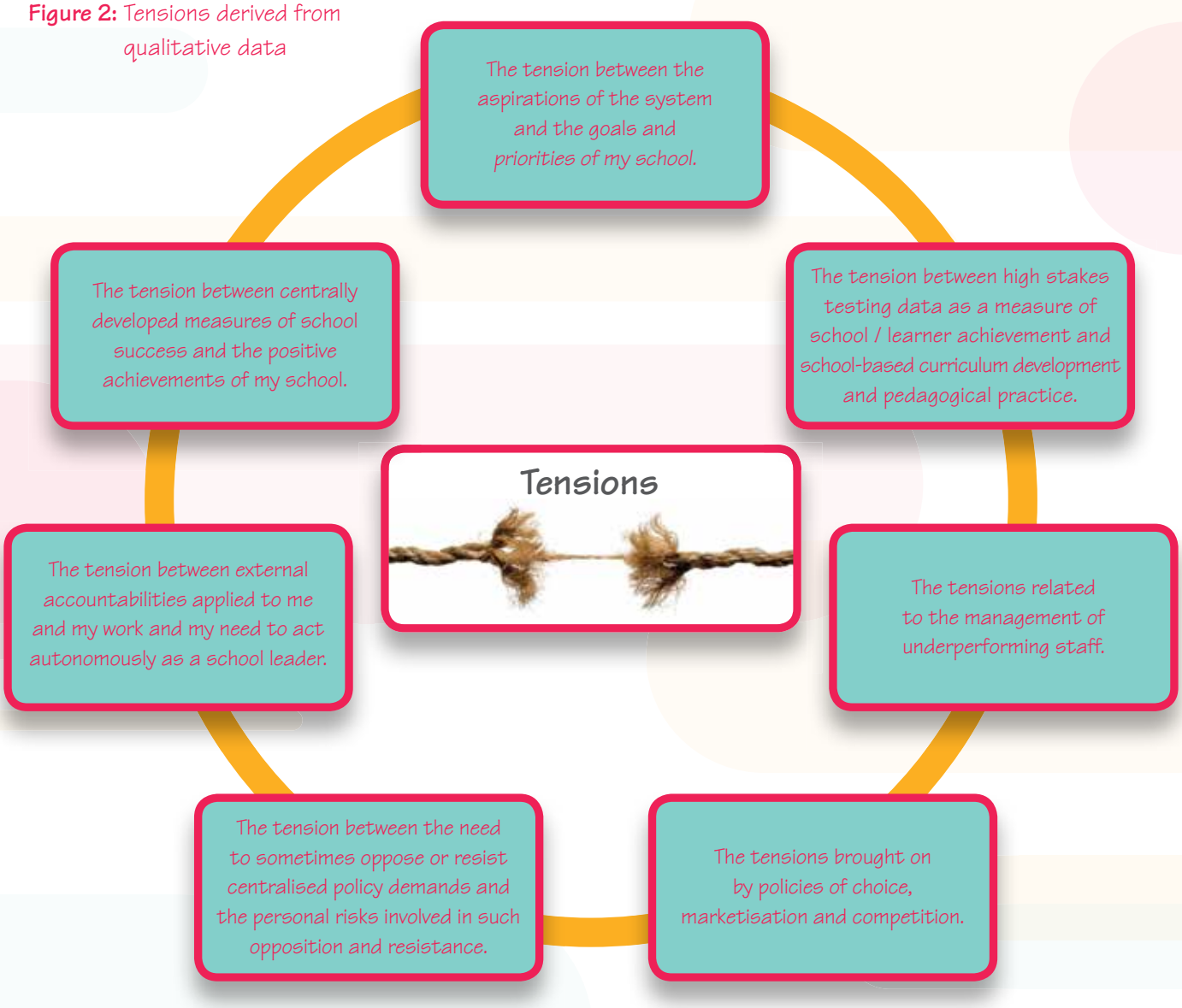
Figure 1: On being a principal – some observations

Tensions

Experiencing tension

A major theme pursued in data collection for both the qualitative and quantitative studies, and consolidated in data analysis, is that of tension in the lives and work of principals. This theme is inextricably bound to the project's overall aim to examine the paradoxical qualities of school leadership, with tension, ambiguity and contradiction taken as a likely presence in both the experience of paradoxical conflict by principals and in their efforts to manage it. Figure 2 shows the seven tensions derived from analysis of the qualitative data in this project.

Figure 2: Tensions derived from qualitative data



The tensions shown in Figure 2 formed a significant section of the survey distributed to principals in the quantitative project. In the survey, an expanded list of twenty tensions were used, grouped into five categories - *system membership, autonomy and accountability, leadership, policy environment* and *personnel management*, with respondents asked to describe how often they experienced each of the twenty tensions, using a 5-point scale. Counting 'Very often' as (5), 'Often' (4),'Sometimes' (3), 'Rarely' (2) and 'Never' (1), and using the categories of tension from the survey, Figure 3 shows the average mean score for each category categories. The graph sheds further light on principal experiences by suggesting diverse origins of the various tensions, ranging from macro-policy requirements through to in-school and personal / professional concerns.

Amongst the twenty tensions described in the survey, the following are the four tensions with the highest mean scores:

1. The tension between being the leader of teaching and learning in my school and attending to the daily demands of my job (mean 4.3)
2. The tension arising from school complexity and workload, and related issues of mental health and wellbeing (mean 4.0)
3. The tension between the system's measures of success and the positive achievements of my school (mean 3.9)
4. The tension between the management of underperforming staff and the accountability requirements of underperformance policy (mean 3.7).

Several confident observations about tension can be made when these top four tensions are read in conjunction with the graph in Figure 3. For example, (i) that tension is a prominent (and even ubiquitous) feature in the lives and work of principals, (ii) that the experiencing of tension is closely associated with issues of workload, mental health and wellbeing, and (iii) that many of the tensions experienced by principals involve the interaction of both macro and micro pressures.

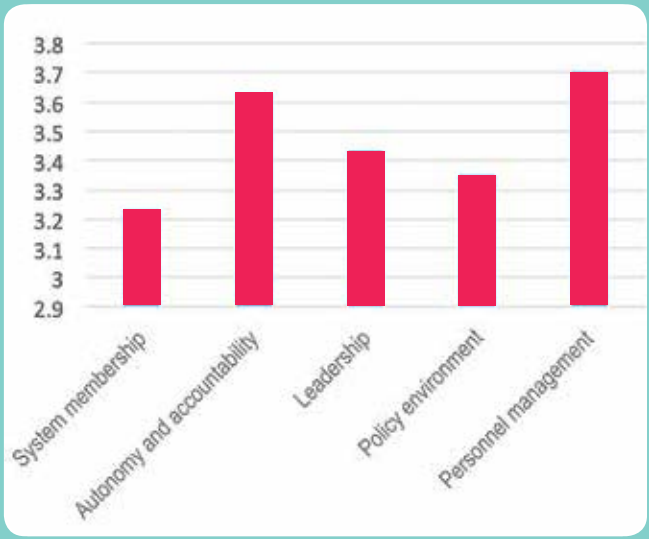


Figure 3:
Average mean scores according to tension categories

Figure 4: What principals do in the policy 'space'

Managing tension

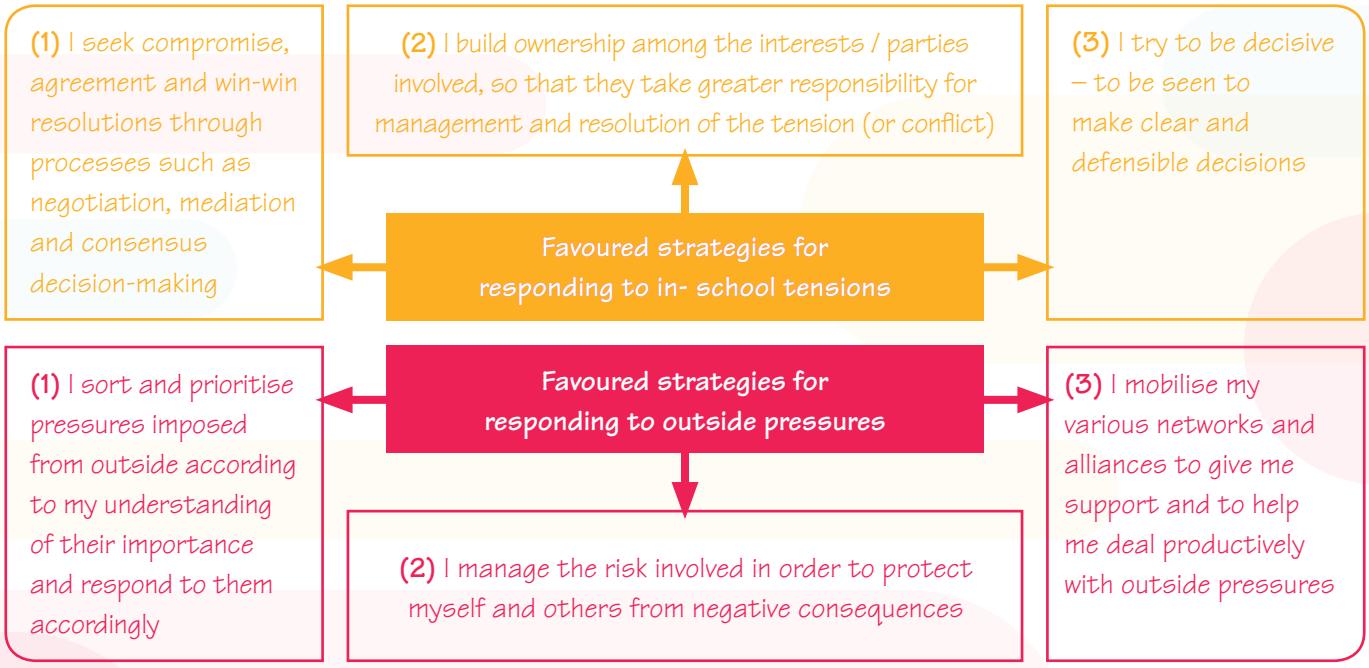
The prominence of tensions in the lives and work of principals connects directly with various preferences amongst principals for managing tensions. The most obvious references in the qualitative study to different ways of managing tension were found in descriptions of principal policy work in the 'space' created between the interests of a centralised policy makers and the local enactment of policy in schools. Figure 4 is a collection of terms used by principal participants to describe what they do in the policy enactment 'space'.

The management of tension formed a prominent part of the survey conducted in the quantitative project. The survey asked respondents to provide information about how they manage tensions in two categories:

1. as part of their 'local leadership' of their schools (seven examples of tensions provided), and
2. in response to 'outside pressures' i.e. tensions brought on by demands from outside of their schools (5 examples of tensions provided).

Figure 5 shows the most favoured leadership strategies for both categories (based on mean score and percentage of responses in the 'often' and 'very often' choices).

Figure 5: Most popular respondent choice for managing.



Taken as a whole, the data collected in this section shows that principals use a broad repertoire of strategies and make considered decisions about which they will deploy according to the nature of the tension they are managing. More specific observations from this part of the research include:

- A preference for avoiding or ameliorating in-school tension and conflict by working collaboratively with and / or building the capacity of others to manage tension themselves.
- A perceived need amongst principals – seemingly contradicting the above point – to act decisively in the face of ambiguity and conflict.
- Principals sorting and prioritising outside pressures suggests qualities associated with meeting local needs, buffering negative effects and judging what needs to be done and what can wait.
- That initiatives, instructions and directives originating from beyond the school embody a level of risk related, for example, to increased workload, heightened accountability and potential damage to professional standing and career prospects.
- A preference for following a 'strength in numbers' principle which embodies recognition of the importance of formal and informal alliances (e.g. SAPPA and SASPA).

Principals as policy workers

Many of the tensions detected and described in this project make reference to 'policy'. In all parts of this research, the meaning of the term policy is taken as exceeding policy texts to also include local responses to the aspirations of policy makers as well as the various processes and vehicles for shifting policy from making to enactment, such as spoken directives, official instructions and policy promotion materials. A theme derived from interviews in the qualitative project and pursued further in the quantitative study is that of the principal as policy worker.

As already described, the various processes principals use to contextualise and modify policy to suit local circumstances form a consistent thread in the data. Questions about acts of resistance, recalcitrance and pushing back in the face of policy demands (e.g. those that are perceived as unreasonable, unfair or unhelpful) receive more nuanced and varied responses. They raise questions not only about the nature and efficacy of these acts, but also about the balancing of risk and reward, and the propensity and capacity of individuals to undertake this work. The quantitative survey attempted to shed some light on these questions by asking 'What type of policy worker are you?' and inviting respondents to choose up to four descriptors – from a list of ten ¬– that characterise their policy work. Figure 6 shows the four most popularly chosen descriptors.

Type of policy worker	Description	No. respondents (/180)
1. Filterer	I sort out which policies I need to treat seriously and which I can ignore, give low priority, partially enact	112
2. Interpreter	I look to interpret and decode centrally developed policy successfully into my local setting	104
3. Opportunist	I use policy as a mandate to lead others in initiatives that would otherwise be difficult to achieve	83
4. Translator	I look to make meaning for others and to tailor centrally developed policy to local needs	80

Figure 6: Most popularly chosen descriptors of principal policy work

The popularly chosen responses in Figure 6, when added to observations from the qualitative study, provide useful insights into how principals work with, on and occasionally against policy. Perhaps most tellingly, the four types favoured by respondents – Filterer, Interpreter, Opportunist and Translator – all describe the active involvement of principals in the previously described policy 'space' between the making of policy and its implementation in schools. Taken together, these responses suggest a willingness of principals to resist assumptions of their compliance and to instead enact policies in ways that are better suited to their local context.

Political interest and engagement

In this project references to the 'political work' of principals were concerned with how principals exert influence within and beyond their school communities. Data collection and analysis in both parts of this research project indicates that principals hold a range of perceptions about their personal levels of political interest and engagement. Amongst these perceptions, understanding of what it means to do political work, curiosity about exploiting opportunities to do this work and a propensity to take risks in working politically all appear as significant variables across the principal cohort. These variables also appear to be linked to high levels of ambivalence, disenchantment and disengagement about any future political project for principals. One way of working with these observations is to contemplate and shape a range of practices that respond to these perceptions. These practices are summarised in Figure 7 into three broad themes, each of which is linked to observations made by principals in this project.

Community leadership and engagement

Includes principal practices of:

- engaging, informing and empowering their school communities
- shaping community opinion about education
- mobilising governing councils to do political work on behalf of their schools.

Executive summary

Caucusing for political purposes	Includes principal practices of: • recognising the influence gained when grouping together around issues in common • countering vulnerability and risk by working with alliances and associations • generating ideas, strategies and support by pooling group resources.
Renegotiating models of consultation	Includes principal practices of: • inquiring into the intentions of centralised policy and the logics that underpin its development and implementation • creating and activating for structures that better support principal involvement and which value and take account of the 'voice from the field'

Some conclusions

While the language of 'conclusive findings' is avoided, several interesting themes and promising possibilities emerged from this research that sit aside from its implications for stakeholder action (covered in the 'recommendations' which follow). These can be briefly summarised as follows:

- ***A mixed-methods approach:*** Methodologically, the project adds to a growing body of literature supporting the mixing of qualitative and quantitative methods
- ***The importance of tension, ambiguity and paradox:*** Working against the washed-out qualities of positivist, acontextual and apolitical readings of the lives and work of principals, this research makes a strong case for making tension, ambiguity and paradox a central consideration.
- ***The felt experience (of tension):*** While it may be reasonable to assume the inevitability of a range of emotions being evoked, this research did not fully pursue or capture the felt experience of tension. Future research might usefully seek a more complete account of the emotion, affect and feeling that accompany tension in the lives and work of principals.
- ***The purposes of schooling:*** Many participants provided locally formed views of these purposes and expressed concern at contemporary policy developments and directions that seem to be having a narrowing effect.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Dissemination: That SAPPA and SASPA seek opportunities to disseminate this research to members, relevant personnel in the senior executive of the Department for Education, the Minister for Education and the general public.

Representation: That SAPPA and SASPA:

- take the strong endorsement for their work in this research project as strengthening the mandate to speak confidently on behalf of their members
- utilise the political themes of the research to help create this voice for principals based on pressing issues related, for example, to tension and conflict, increased work demands and mental health
- critically consider their lobbying work and related issues of freedom and independent representation.

Professional learning: That SAPPA and SASPA build professional learning opportunities for members based on the findings of this research.

Principal role: That SAPPA and SASPA work with the DfE to use the report to deepen understandings of the current role of principals in schools and to support discussion of how this role (and popularly held perceptions) might change in the future.

Policy interest: That SAPPA and SASPA:

- use this research to help inform and enlarge established priorities, to plan and position future work and to explore complementarity with other research (e.g. *The Report on the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey and Beyond Certainty: A Process for Thinking About Futures for Australian Education*).
- discern more precisely the nature of the changes to public education policy suggested by this research and commit to a set of practical strategies for advancing this project.

Interactions (with principals in schools): That SAPPA and SASPA work with the DfE to attend to the relationships between central office and principals in schools, for example:

- in recognising the achievements of all schools and of improvements gained within and beyond sanctioned improvement measures
- in supporting a more generative and democratic relationship between Educational Directors and principals
- acknowledging the increased demands being made of principals and seeking broad redress through improved resourcing, recognition and influence.

Cooperation and co-design: That SAPPA and SASPA work with the DfE to consider the practical implications of a changed role for principals in terms of:

- involving principals more directly and comprehensively in the co-design of policy
- improving structures and methods for principal consultation in policy development
- creating greater flexibility in policy implementation to better accommodate local needs
- supporting increased autonomy for principals with attendant improvements in resourcing and workload.

Practicing: That SAPPA and SASPA principals work individually and collectively on their ethico-political positioning and influence, for example, by:

- increasing personal propensity for exerting greater control over life and work
- improving repertoires of skills and strategies

- providing political leadership for their school communities
- being ready to engage with conflicting voices and to speak up and speak back in respectful and constructive ways.

Principal wellbeing: That SAPPA and SASPA work with the DfE to:

- take account of concerted references in the research to principal health and wellbeing and consider these references in conjunction with the findings of the 'Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey' conducted out of The Australian Catholic University and Deakin University.
- consider leader workload in the implementation of new initiatives and to determine what impact any new work might have on leader workload and wellbeing. Further, SAPPA and SASPA should work with the DfE to consider how the workload of new initiatives can manifest itself differently according to contexts and communities.

Self-preservation: That SAPPA and SASPA principals be encouraged to develop a more sustainable account of themselves and their work by paying close attention to research findings about the relations between workplace tensions and variables such as mental health, accountability, efficacy and professional self-regard.

Leadership of teaching and learning: That SAPPA and SASPA work with the DfE, in concert with the Commonwealth's commitment to reduce red tape in schools, to identify ways for principals to manage less and lead more.

Engaging and knowing: That SAPPA and SASPA principals, as part of their commitment to evidence-based improvement:

- engage with this report and seek opportunities to share its contents and findings with colleagues
- take opportunities to attend professional learning related to the contents and findings of this project
- seek opportunities for school-base action research on topics related to this research.

Caucusing: That SAPPA and SASPA principals be invited to critically consider current opportunities for participation and political involvement through group membership (e.g. of SAPPA / SASPA, local principal alliances, Partnerships and other bodies) and the ways in which these opportunities might be utilised and enhanced.

PART 1:

Overview of the project

Origins

The project *Paradox in the lives and work of school principals* originated, in part, from previous research conducted by Dr Chris Dolan into the constitutive effects of policy on school principals. In this research, 15 paradoxes were identified as influential in the current shaping of principals and their work. In subsequent discussions, conducted by Chris with various academic staff at the University of South Australia and the respective Boards of SAPPA and SASPA, a developing interest in paradox and related notions of tension, ambiguity and contradiction was noted and the idea of a joint research project was mooted, planned and actualised over the latter part of 2018 and early 2019. The agreed aim of this research project – titled *Paradox in the lives and work of school principals* – was to examine the paradoxical qualities of school leadership, with a focus on the lives and work of school principals.

A gap in current thinking

As part of the planning process, it was envisaged that this research would work into a gap in current thinking about school leadership. While much of popular school leadership literature is taken up with positivist accounts of the influential work of school principals, theoretical understandings of desired leadership traits and instrumental

measures of leader effectiveness, little attention is given to the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions that characterise principal's lives and work. There are some notable exceptions describing the conflicting demands on principals and other school leaders (e.g. Eden, 1998; Peters & Le Cornu, 2004; Starr, 2014); the need to identify, embrace and research paradox, ambiguity and dialectics (e.g. Collinson, 2014; Watson, 2013); and the specific tensions that arise in policy and leadership work in schools (e.g. Barker, 2007; Watson, 2013; Webb, Gulson, & Pitton, 2014). However, the greater proportion of comprehensive paradox studies come from the field of organisational and management studies (e.g. in the extensive work of Marianne Lewis, Lotte Luscher, Jonathon Schad, Wendy Smith, Linda Putnam and Gail Fairhurst). This research is directed to attending to the constitutive work of tension, ambiguity and contradiction as well as providing a more expansive understanding of the conceptual possibilities, theoretical content and practical application of paradox in educational leadership settings.

Guiding questions

In planning, it was envisaged that the research project would address three guiding questions:

- What are the tensions, ambiguities and conflicts in the lives and work of principals?
- How do principals experience / manage them?
- How might insights into these tensions, ambiguities and conflicts support an understanding of the paradoxical qualities of the principalship?

While these questions remained pertinent throughout the project, data collection and analysis quite naturally created additional lines of inquiry and, by extension, more questions to be addressed. The reference to 'paradox' in the project title and in the last of the guiding questions suggests a prominence that does not fully materialise in the report which follows. Rather, a series of paradoxes are used as part of the analysis of data, to reveal a complexity in many of the tensions described that would otherwise be lost or overlooked.

The methodology for the project was devised in consultation with the various partner organisations, as were related decisions about project design, timing, principal participation, stakeholder communication, milestones and planned outcomes. Approval for the project was sought and gained from the Department for Education (SA) and the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee.

Terminology

Important terms used in this project, for example, those linked to methodology (e.g. qualitative, quantitative, reflexivity, pragmatism), those associated with the principal role (such as leadership, management, subjectivity, identity) and those that indicate the presence of tension (including paradox, ambiguity, conflict, contradiction) are either defined along the way or rely on a meaning that emerges from the analysis of data.

However, two other terms regularly used in this report – the noun *policy* and the adjective *political* – need to be clarified at the outset. This is because a range of meanings are attached to both terms in their everyday use as well as in the existing literature.

References to 'policy' are usefully clarified by drawing from a selective 'cut' of the literature that is concerned with broadening the meaning attached to policy. Certainly, the word is often used in this report to convey a narrower 'policy-as-text' interpretation typically in reference to the centrally developed documents, directives and codified instructions that flow into schools. However, as Ball (1993) notes, 'policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended'. He also suggests that the definition of policy can only be complete if it takes account of the 'wild profusion of local practices' that accompany policy implementation (p. 10). This broaderdefinition, which is favoured in this report, is further enriched by Ozga (2000) who claims that policy also includes any 'vehicle or medium for carrying or transmitting a policy message' (p. 33). Such an addition supports

the inclusion in discussion of devices like spoken directives, official instructions and the various processes of marketing and promotion that announce and endorse new policy texts. The broadening of meaning is also suggestive of the more dynamic and unstable qualities of policy, introducing the contingency of 'central input and local inflections' (Clarke, Bainton, Lendvai & Stubbs, 2015, p. 15) in order to interrupt notions of a linear flow of policy knowledge and assumptions of a smooth and untroubled implementation of policy ambitions and intentions in schools.

In this project, 'political' is generally used to evoke ideas about power and influence, drawing it close to dictionary definitions such as 'relating to the ideas or strategies of a particular party or group in politics' (Lexico /Oxford, 2020) and 'relating to the way power is achieved and used' (Collins, 2020). For example, in this report references to the 'political work' of principals are concerned with how principals exert influence within and beyond their school communities, while references to a 'political project' for principals relate to positioning of principals in ways that might apportion to them a greater share of power and, by extension, support them to become more influential. Use of terms like 'political actions' and 'political interest and engagement' shift attention to the actual practices of principals that interact with the workings and relations of power that circulate in, through and from the macro-policy environment and form part of the micropolitics of schools. In this report, these terms are applied

i. to the actual work that principals do to comply with, resist, leverage, filter and buffer policy and its effects, and

ii. to surface practices of power and influence as an antidote to the apolitical qualities that are often attached to expectations of principals and their work.

The related idea of 'political voice' speaks more directly to the additional power and influence gained when principals speak with a collective voice, generally via the various associations and alliances to which they belong.

A mixed-methods approach

A mixed-methods approach was used to collect data. This data collection occurred as a two-part sequence involving:

i. a qualitative study (herein referred to as 'the qualitative study') based on the interview responses of 20 principals (10 primary and 10 secondary), and

ii. a quantitative study (herein referred to as 'the quantitative study') using a web-based survey made available to all principal members of SAPPA and SASPA in South Australian state schools.

Analysis and interpretation of data from both studies was undertaken by a series of processes outlined in detail later in this report. Information and some tentative 'findings' derived from these processes were subsequently shared with the Boards of SAPPA and SASPA and continue to be shared through various professional development events.

PART 2:

The qualitative study

Principal participation

The 10 primary and 10 secondary principal participants in the qualitative study were chosen from comprehensive lists of available participants provided by SAPPA and SASPA. The smaller sample size in this study was founded on the idea that there is value, and perhaps greater integrity, in understanding the complexity of school leadership through more intensive contact with individual principals in their natural setting. The selection of participants in the project sought significant variations in circumstances, contexts and leadership experience on the premise that such a group would bring a range of perspectives to the data they would provide about their lives and work.

Directed to choosing a diverse and broadly-based participant group, the selection process applied criteria related to school location, type and level of disadvantage, and to principal experience, gender and willingness to participate. The limitations of the sample size, however, prevented representation of the full range of principal sub-groups. The confidentiality of information and the anonymity of principal participants in the qualitative study was (and continues to be) protected by the various secure data storage strategies and by the removal of any school or participant identifiers from the data.

Principals selected as participants in the qualitative study were advised of their selection and, after indicating an initial willingness to participate, were provided with

i. a formal letter of request

ii. a detailed overview of the project, including the extent of their personal commitment

iii. an informed consent proforma to formally confirm the conditions of their participation, and

iv. an indicative set of interview questions on which interview data collection was to be based.

Method

The qualitive study used semi-structured face-to-face interviews to collect responses from 20 principals (10 primary and 10 secondary). The interviews were conducted over the period May-June 2019. Principal participants received an indicative set of interview questions prior to their scheduled interview (see Appendix 1). Participants were interviewed individually, with each interview lasting approximately one-hour. Audio recordings of the interviews were then transcribed by the researcher, with participants given a subsequent opportunity to edit, vet or enlarge the transcription of this interview.

Data analysis

As a first level of analysis, the researcher organised the primary data from the qualitative study into a consistent and usable form before deploying a system of 'open coding' to decontextualise units of text into segments so that similar events or themes or actions could be grouped together. Second level analysis was used to thematise the data into more discrete and manageable parts and to establish connections between the various themes identified. The results of this analysis and, in particular, the grouping of data into themes, was subsequently used to inform the questions used in the quantitative study.

PART 3:

Observations from the qualitative study

a) On being principal: positive (and occasionally negative) perceptions

In response to an introductory line of questioning about what each participant enjoyed about being in the position of principal, a large body of information was gathered about principal perceptions of the positive (and occasionally negative) aspects of their work. This information can be represented summarily in four broad groupings of participant responses.

Being influential

Multiple references were made to the influence that the principal position carries and to how the potential for influence is realised through acts of leadership. Lee notes the heightened level of influence enjoyed by the principal:

> *... the thing I enjoy most, I guess, is being in a position to exert an influence over the organization and the effective running of such an important institution as a school. One of my frustrations, in various roles in the past, has been being able to see some things which I don't think are helpful, or even desirable, and not necessarily being in a position to do much about it. So I like being in that position of influence to do what I think is one of the most important jobs and that is educate young people.*

Many variables emerged from data analysis including:

- **i.** *the field of principal influence e.g.* over the collaborative work with colleagues, the conduct and enthusiasm of staff, the learning and wellbeing of students and the perceptions the community holds of the school
- **ii.** *the breadth and extent of principal influence e.g.* in the way individuals understand their leadership as autocratic, directive, shared, distributed etc, and in the moderating effects of systems compliance
- **iii.** *the contextual factors controlling fields and levels of principal influence e.g.* in a prerequisite requirement for trust and confidence in the leader, in the principal's capacity to understand local needs, and principal capacity and propensity to draw effectively on research and evidence.

Figure 1 uses excerpts from interview responses to represent these and other variables associated with the influence of the principal.

Influence in a low SES setting:

I think for me it is about the influence I have around my own personal moral compass and that being able to be in a position where you can influence and impact on the lives of some children in the world. And certainly, for me, the context of working in low-SES schools and multicultural schools also means that together, hopefully, we can change some of the complex marginalisation of kids. One family at a time, trying to change some of the attitudes of who belongs in our world and who doesn't. (Amy)

Influencing change:

I have really enjoyed leading change, some of it is really challenging, some of it really frustrating, some of it scary, but being able to own it and see the influence that I as an individual and collectively can accomplish. I think, if I was really honest, it's got quite a bit to do with ego, but it's also about influence. (Amelia)

Influencing people:

The things that I most like about the principal's job is the ability to influence so much of what goes on in the school, the ability to develop and nurture teachers and leaders into being really quality operators, and the daily interactions I have with young people whom I really, really like a lot. (Felicity)

Being locally (and systemically) influential:

... principals are influential to a degree, yes and I use my influence to support the system, as in leaders in other sites. And I feel really passionate about that … I see the system as a political beast and understand my influence is probably greatest within my local school community (Clare)

Figure 1: On principal influence

While principal participants appeared comfortable in describing themselves and their work as 'influential' a vocabulary that more explicitly signifies their power and control was rarely invoked. This preference for less forceful descriptors is likely directed to securing of the principal's preferred leadership identity and appears to denote the presence of a form of 'pastoral power' (see Foucault 2007) with principals opting to 'shepherd the flock' towards desired practices and behaviours rather than giving directions founded on the designated authority of their position. Additionally, references made by principal participants to being influential rarely extended beyond local school and community boundaries. None of the principal participants referred to being influential in their systemic dealings, with the power relations circulating between central office and the schools generally characterised as heavily skewed towards the policy-making arm and as supporting hierarchical systems of accountability and influence.

Being part of a community

Being part of a community, several principal participants claim, contributes significantly to the positive perceptions they hold about their work. The principal's community connection is captured in its many dimensions by Denise, a primary principal in a country town:

> ***The thing I like most about being a principal is the connection to community, whether that be my own personal staff members, the kids of course, but also then that real community connection with families. And that development of how I can improve the school environment that we've got here by working through all of those people. I love where I am … and the support networks that are here. We look after each other to be honest. And I think that I'm doing my job to make a difference – for the better of our kids, for the better of our staff and the community. That's why I do it. That's my passion. That's my drive.***

Marika, a secondary principal in a metropolitan school, describes how she finds a sense of community in her interactions with staff:

> ***In a really weird sort of way, I absolutely love my job. There's been many a time that I've thought, 'I'm going to throw this away, it's just not worth my sleepless nights and the absolute workload'. I don't know, I guess it's about being real with my staff. It's about, you know, you cry with your staff, you laugh with your staff. You do all of that stuff and by being very connected with the staff and the students here … there's a sense of belonging that the job brings. And it's a sense of fulfillment that you get from that.***

This community connection appears to infer an added responsibility for principals as well as a heightened awareness of the need to manage the impressions their school is making on and in its community. Karen says that:

> ***The community and the community perceptions of the school is probably something that I wear pretty heavily … I think it comes back to me feeling this enormous sense of responsibility in terms of the role that I've got ... that under my watch, I want the school to prosper, go forward to be considered to be making a really positive contribution to the community.***

While several other principals note how community involvement contributes to their job satisfaction an interesting theme arises from their input about the political work that principals do on, with, for and on behalf of their communities. This theme is further enlarged in the interview excerpts in Figure 2.

Influencing the community from a privileged position

As a principal, you're a bit privileged in that you get the opportunity to be able to influence the wider community to a certain extent through various groups that you're involved in and through the media and comments that you might make or might not make. (Anton)

Being accountable to the community

We're answerable for the decisions we make because we make them on the basis of 'what is the best for our students in this community'? What is it the community wants? What is the best decision? And they rely on us to know what is the best thing for their students … to get the best student outcomes. (Asha)

Speaking, listening and positioning

(My approach is to) leverage policy to benefit the outcomes of the kids and the staff and the community. (Raymond)

...they don't just see me as a professional in the school, they see me as somebody who lives in their community, and they just come and tell me what they think all the time. (Janine).

When I speak, I speak from a voice that represents my community, so the collective voice works … I guess we are repositioning what the goals are, what the aims of the department are, in terms of a world class education system, and we're repositioning that to, what does that mean for us? What does it mean for this community? Although we do recognise that we are part of a larger system. (Marika)

Figure 2: Principals and community political work

Having some agency and autonomy

Several participants highlight autonomy as key to their enjoyment of the principal role. For example:

> ***I enjoy the autonomy I can create for myself as a principal and being able to work with my staff in having a look at the cohort needs of our students and being able to strategically plan about how we can support our students to achieve better learning outcomes. (Marika)***

> ***I like the autonomy. I like the flexibility to be able to focus on the things that I think are important in my day-to-day work and have the flexibility to make those decisions for myself. So, I've found since being a principal that, I guess from a line management perspective, I've got a significant amount of autonomy to really just run the school, day to day as I see or need to. (Raymond)***

> ***I love the fact that there is a degree of autonomy and with that autonomy comes the opportunity to set the vision and to connect everyone to that vision. From our students, to our ancillary staff, our teaching staff, our leaders, to really, really maximise impact. You can do that in a really strategic, autonomous way, so that's what I love about it. (Clare)***

Amongst these responses, however, there are several claims that principal autonomy comes with a number of preconditions and qualifiers. For example, one participant claims that autonomy inside of systemic requirements is won by 'basically not causing any grief'. Conversely, another suggests that by threatening conflict you can actually derive a greater freedom to act locally 'because the system doesn't like to have debates'.

Beyond such pre-conditions, many principals acknowledge that the freedom or agency to which they lay claim is l fashioned inside of—and sometimes despite—a broader requirement for consistency and compliance across the system. Thus, observations made about hierarchical decision making, formal accountabilities and outside judgements, are not interpreted as robbing the principal entirely of the capacity to act locally with a degree of freedom. This co-existence of apparent opposites, and the balancing act it suggests, is highlighted by the following excerpts from interview:

> ***(The) thing I like about being a principal is whilst we're still part of the system, there is that level of being in control and managing this space. I am bossy, being the leader of a site is something that I personally like doing. (Amelia)***

> ***I absolutely enjoy the type of freedom that enables me to be able to do what I need to do, when I want to do it, within reason. (Andrew)***

The tension between systemic accountabilities and principal autonomy is discussed in more detail later in this report.

Leading teaching and learning

Anton claims that:

> ***The number one thing that I've really enjoyed about the principalship is that opportunity to influence young people in so many different ways, in terms of their education in the moment, their aspirations for the future, and also how they fit into, not only the learning community, but the wider community as a whole.***

Along similar lines, Clare says:

> ***I feel really passionate about learning, as in the learning of young people. I believe in the role of principal you have the greatest influence on learning outcomes of students. And I sort of have this really strong sense of responsibility in preparing young people for our future world.***

These sentiments are echoed, albeit in various different forms, by many of the principal participants. They speak quite directly to versions of the principalship that are tied up with the popular theories of 'instructional' and 'educational' leadership, to official documents pertaining to the job such as the Australian Professional Standard for Principals and to the responsibility principals feel for the learning outcomes that students achieve. Analysis of qualitative data reveals both a desire amongst principals to be more deeply involved in the leadership of teaching and learning and a range of complexities and frustrations that prevent the full realisation of this desire.

For example, Thomas says of his reasons for becoming a principal:

> ***I think it's more of a drive to succeed as an educator. It's something that grows inside you, it's a passion … you always hope that 99.9% of the time, what you do has a positive impact on kids, and that you contribute to their life and to society.***

More pragmatically, Thomas shifts his attention to the right 'organisational conditions' that principals need to create when they look to lead teaching and learning:

> ***the organizational conditions of compliance mean that you have to make sure that policies and processes are in place at the local level. This is the speed-hump. Once you've done that and have created a safe, caring and enjoyable learning environment, you're over the speed-hump, then you can put all your energy, and all your resources into the core business, that is the quality of the teaching and learning.***

Wendy also makes reference to the barriers that stand in the principal's way, but is clear about what the work involves:

> *I think that it's just difficult to spend enough time on that [leading teaching and learning] because of the distractions with red tape and paperwork. But I like the terminology because when you can devote time to that, you actually can have an influence when you're in alongside coaching new teachers especially, and early career teachers who are really passionate, and excited about what they're doing, and students who perhaps have been disengaged that you feel that you've been able to turnaround and that makes you feel like it's worthwhile.*

The theme of leading teaching and learning is present in discussion that follows about the tensions experienced by principals. However, a more direct reference occurs in later analysis of quantitative data, with respondents indicating that *'the tension between being a leader of teaching and learning in my school and attending to the daily demands of my job'* is one that is prevalent in their working lives.

b) Tensions

Introduction

A major theme pursued in data collection for the qualitative study, and consolidated in data analysis, is that of tension in the lives and work of principals. This theme is inextricably bound to the project's overall aim to examine the paradoxical qualities of school leadership, with tension, ambiguity and contradiction taken as a likely presence in both the experience of paradoxical conflict by principals and in their efforts to manage it.

Interpreting and 'constructing' the data: While the following summary of the tensions revealed in data collected for the qualitative part of this project is designed to summarily depict tensions commonly experienced by principal participants, it is also important to acknowledge that these tensions are in some part a 'constructed' interpretation of the data. Several reflexive concerns arise from this type of construction which must be taken into account in the depictions of tension which follow:

- These depictions are necessarily reductive and simplified representations of the actual complexity of the conflict, ambiguity and tension experienced by principals in their lives and work.
- The discrete representations of tension, including giving each a two-sided quality, fails to take full account of the plurality and competing interests that mark many tensions, and does not properly acknowledge how many of the tensions depicted are related to each other (e.g. the first three tensions described in the following pages are thematically aligned by the current emphasis on high stakes testing and, by extension, have many interrelated elements).
- The construction of tension also requires a certain level of researcher intervention - and researcher positioning - in relation to data analysis, effectively reducing opportunities for other interpretive possibilities and bringing the historical, political and epistemological preferences of the researcher more obviously into play.

While reflexive concerns such as these were in play in the development of this project and in data collection and analysis, this research project has endeavoured to maintain a pragmatic focus geared to practical outcomes. Alvesson (2010) describes this positioning as *reflexive pragmatism:*

> **... a balancing of endless reflexivity and radical scepticism with a sense of direction and a commitment to accomplishing a result ..... (it) means a bracketing of uncertainty and indecisiveness in favour of a wish to offer some good interpretations and to try to encourage understanding of a well-picked topic of inquiry. (p. 7)**

Another dimension in the representation of data collected about tensions in the qualitative study, is to add a paradox interpretive lens to data analysis. To this end, and in keeping with the objectives of the project, a series of paradoxes are proposed in the depiction of tensions which follows.

The value of a mixed-methods approach: One way in which some of the these concerns were addressed in this project was by making a direct link between the interpretation of the qualitative data and the construction of the survey tool which underpinned data collection in the quantitative project. In short, this involved using the depictions of tension from the qualitative project as the basis for many of the questions used in the quantitative survey tool. The effect of linking these projects in a mixed method approach, was to test the veracity and recognition of tension derived from the qualitative project with a much broader principal participant group. The following depictions of tension, therefore, are best read in conjunction with the relevant observations from the quantitative study, described in the second half of this report.

The tension between the aspirations of the system and the goals and priorities of my school

The aspirations of the system ⟷ **The goals and priorities of my school**

As interviews for the qualitative study were conducted in May-June 2019, they coincided with the early experiences of principals with a centrally developed school improvement model which was first introduced in September 2018. This model – and its accompanying 'improvement planning cycle' ¬– thus formed the context for many observations about interactions between the aspirations of the system and local goals and priorities.

Raymond makes clear his understanding of the benefits of the improvement model:

> ***I'd say the new structure around school improvement planning is going to yield a lot of benefits for the system in the longer term. Because I think the original process of having loads of different ways in which people were doing improvement planning through free choice and autonomy, wasn't going to address the system issues that we've got. And I think we do need to bring it in, and have a consistent approach, probably for five to 10 years, and then when the system has a bit more consistency, then you allow a bit more autonomy.***

Andrew also reflects on the purpose of this improvement initiative, but identifies a fundamental tension arising in its implementation:

> ***They're trying to align stuff, bring it together so that our PDP with staff is aligned to their site improvement - I understand all that. But we are a massive organisation with really different sites with thousands of people who work at all sorts of levels***

Many observations from principal participants highlight an apparent disconnect between a narrowly focussed Department for Education improvement agenda and the broader functions and purposes of schooling being enacted locally. This disconnect is perhaps most vividly captured in observations made by Amy, a primary school principal in a low SES setting:

> *For me currently, the biggest area that I'm finding a disconnect is with our current stages of improvement model, where we are making decisions systematically about the growth of student learning purely based on NAPLAN. The reasons that I find the disconnect is there are so many children in my school who are not working at their chronological age, and therefore that test doesn't show growth. It just shows the things they can't do.*

Amy continues

> *The current tool that we're using to make a really big statement about the success of the school isn't taking into account all of the growth that's happening for all kids that are coming in not toilet trained, barely speaking. We're measuring a very tiny aspect. And don't get me wrong, I totally understand why NAPLAN's around, but it can't be the only measurement of school success.*

Another primary school principal, Isabella, highlights how the expression of the system's aspirations, through a requirement for a new site improvement plan, conflicts with already established site planning processes.

> *When the new school improvement model was brought out, I just said straight away, we're sticking with our own site improvement plan. I'll do what I have to do, we'll create a more targeted ... we'll use it as a literacy and numeracy action plan. Because I don't see it as a school improvement plan, because it's so limited to literacy and numeracy outcomes. Whereas ours was more around intellectual engagement, intellectual challenge for kids, task design.*

Isabella goes on to reflect on the difficulty of selling this centrally led initiative to staff:

> *That new school improvement model ... trying to sell this to staff when there was an eight-week turnaround. We got told we had to do it, and we had to get it in by week eight of Term four. Trying to support that and get teachers on board without hearing the general, "Here we go again. A new thing that we're having to do." That's a real tension for me.*

The data from which the tension between the aspirations of the system and the local goals and priorities of schools is drawn, suggests that deep contradictions arise from centralised attempts to describe to school leaders, the need to see their work in a broader system-wide context. *The paradox of system membership* which follows highlights the inherent contradictions for principals constituting themselves and their work inside of the broader system.

Figure 3: The paradox of system membership

For principals, the paradoxical qualities of system membership originate in the uneven power distributions that characterise the system's hierarchical arrangements and which render principals as more vulnerable, and therefore more amenable, to central directives via system-led processes of communication, consultation, line management and accountability.

Paradoxically, this power imbalance is often downplayed in favour of claims from those nearer the top of the hierarchy about the system's democratic and consultative qualities that are, in turn, used to discourage ambivalence and create expectations of loyalty and support amongst principals.

For many principals, their commitment to working within a broader system must be balanced against feelings of indifference, disappointment and resentment towards particular policy directives and central office compliance requirements. The paradox of system membership appears to gain prominence when a principal's membership of the broader system is brought into conflict with local commitments and loyalties, for example, in the implementation of policy that may be deemed a poor fit to local needs.

adapted from Dolan, C. (2020). *Paradox and the school leader: The struggle for the soul of the principal in neoliberal times.* Singapore: Springer

The tension between centrally developed measures of school success and the positive achievements of my school

Centrally developed measures of school success ⟷ **The positive achievements of my school**

Closely related to the previously discussed tension (i.e. between the system's aspirations and the school's goals and priorities) is the tension arising from the way the success of schools is measured and recognised. Analysis of interview transcripts from this project, shows that principals have well-developed critical insights into high stakes testing and its purposes and, more particularly, the role played by NAPLAN data in determining the relative merits and successes of their schools. Andrew captures this role when he notes:

> **... the majority of the feedback we get on where our school is at is based on NAPLAN, and that's basically it, which is a real shame because there is so much more ... we've got kids here who under test conditions maybe don't perform as well as they could. We've got a whole lot of other data that we collect that gives us the overall picture. Unfortunately everything from our department is focused on this really narrow area.**

Janine says that 'the whole system is focussed on NAPLAN data' and laments how this leads to a lack of interest in local contextual knowledge:

> **So all of the instructions about our professional learning and what I should be doing and what materials I need to use, because they've made those for me as well, totally disregards any of our contextual knowledge at the site and says to a whole bunch of kids, 'this is your NAPLAN score, this is where you are .... you're a school that needs to pull your socks up'**

Along similar lines, Isabella claims that 'you can't narrow a school's achievements or improvement agenda down to just literacy and numeracy based on NAPLAN', while Amy reflects succinctly on her school's response to the NAPLAN emphasis when she says, 'we just continue with the stuff that we know matters. We don't ignore NAPLAN, but we don't invest in the results at the same level the system does'.

Felicity, provides insights into the additional risks and shortcomings in a secondary setting of relying on NAPLAN as a measure of school success:

> *We try to keep NAPLAN testing as low key as possible. The issue is that we only have one set of NAPLAN data that we have any influence or control over. So just having Year 9 doesn't really help us, because we can't measure growth against anything that we've been doing, and Year 9s are tricky to have in isolation. (Also) our NAPLAN results compared with our kids' abilities would suggest they're not really that interested in doing them … they're not highly engaged by the test.*

Centrally developed notions of school success are, according to the claims of principals cited in this section, deeply enmeshed with acontextual processes of data collection and measurement.

These claims are further supported in critically oriented academic literature. For example, Bansel (2015) describes a policy preoccupation 'with an empiricism that fetishises numbers' and a concomitant insistence that the measurable indicators of excellence are the only ones that count, matter and have meaning (p. 6). Rajagopal (2014) builds on this idea by suggesting that high stakes testing is designed to elicit knowledge about school excellence and to have experts institutionalise it as an accredited knowledge system (p. 2). The claim by principal participants that these processes should be open to further scrutiny is supported by Heffernan (2018) when she notes that '(o)bjectivity is implied by the presentation of numbers, facts, and figures in standardised forms that do not take local contexts or complexities into account' (p. 7). Elsewhere, Heffernan (2018) links this preoccupation with data to unfair judgements of schools by invoking the notion of a 'sociology of numbers'. She claims that this notion embodies the idea that 'numbers are fair and rigorous representations of the work undertaken in schools and indeed may be adopted as a means of making this work measurable or accessible to those with little knowledge of the field, providing licence to make judgments without having expertise to support these judgments' (p. 7).

Heffernan's claim speaks quite directly to the way data derived from high stakes testing has come to count as a proxy for excellence (or the absence of it) in schools. *The paradox of excellence* captures something of the duplicitous and antithetical qualities that arise in this 'judgement by numbers' arrangement.

Figure 4: The paradox of excellence

Seen through a paradox lens, the prominence of current accounts of excellence (and related notions of success, high achievement and continuous improvement) that are based on data-informed measurement are brought into conflict with more dispersed concerns about the narrowing, corrupting and simplifying the evidence-base. In this configuration of interrelated oppositions, the currently-valued preference for using test data as a proxy for excellence can be linked to risk-averse and opportunistic responses from both teachers and leaders – for example, in well documented 'teach-to-the-test' methodologies, impression management tactics and data manipulation strategies – that actually work against broader and more substantial notions of improvement and excellence.

adapted from Dolan, C. (2020). *Paradox and the school leader: The struggle for the soul of the principal in neoliberal times.* Singapore: Springer

The tension between high stakes testing data as a measure of school / learner achievement and school-based curriculum development and pedagogical practice

High stakes testing data as a measure of school / learner achievement ⟷ **School-based curriculum development and pedagogical practice**

This tension extends discussion of the prominence and impact of high stakes testing (especially NAPLAN) by outlining how it is brought into tension with a range of school-based processes and practices linked to teaching and learning.

The tension between narrowly focussed test data and broader in-school concerns about student learning is suggested by Janine when she claims:

> *The narrative out there, outside of the school, is all about improvement according to NAPLAN. So in my partnership, in my portfolio, all of these new plans we have to build are all about our NAPLAN data and about improving it. I was the only one that had ... one of our three goals, was for kids to know about their learning and know what they need to do next – know how to evaluate themselves as a learner and be successful.*

Janine continues along these lines, emphasising the importance her school places on creativity:

> *... the Partnership is a big part of our work now, and I found it really hard to engage with that stuff (NAPLAN based measures of improvement) because it's not related to the purposes of schooling. We're really strong on creativity here, and its creativity in science and maths and the arts and drama and music, its creativity all the way through. It's about being a creative person in whatever you're learning. It's just so important, but it's just not acknowledged and not recognised. And I mean, we do get better results because of it, but not necessarily measured by NAPLAN.*

When asked about the effects of the MySchool website on parent perceptions of her school, Erica says 'I'm not sure, to be honest. I try not to look at things that infuriate me. ... The parents here, I think they're confident and comfortable'. However, she goes on to note:

> *the frustrating thing is, all of the resourcing that goes into those things, that could be better spent helping the kids that need the help, or raising the bar, or improving what we can offer ... we're expected to build a world class education system, one that's developing enterprise in kids, where innovation and STEM, and all of those things, are part of it. But we don't want to hear about your progress, we just want you to talk about NAPLAN improvement.*

Lee draws on a specific program implemented in his school and a tension he notes between the specific recognition the program brought and broader measures of success:

> *We've been successful in being part of the Entrepreneurial Schools program. And that was really attractive to us, because the broad goals of that really pulled together a whole lot of the work we've done about student agency, about real world problem solving, about the focus on capabilities, rather than just content, those sorts of things. However, there is that recognition, but there's still the snap back to the NAPLAN, the ATAR and the exams, which don't necessarily coincide with what we are doing.*

The data from principal interviews used to identify and specify this particular tension, finds support in a significant body of literature that highlights the potentially damaging impacts of high stakes testing on curriculum development and pedagogical practice (e.g. Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Lobascher, 2011).

Polesel, Rice & Dulfer (2014), usefully link these impacts to the external accountability regime that NAPLAN testing has spawned. In their report on a study of the views of 8000 educators on the impact of NAPLAN on Australian schools and students, they conclude that 'the use of [NAPLAN] results is undoubtedly feeding competition between schools, and shaping public discourses that centre on failure and success, winners and losers'. In turn, the authors note the 'flow-on effects from these types of accountability practices in 'a narrowing of curriculum, a restriction in the range of skills and competencies learnt by students and a constriction of pedagogical approaches' (p. 653)

Part 3:

The tension between external accountabilities applied to me and my work and my need to act autonomously as a school leader

External accountabilities applied to me and my work ⟷ **My need to act autonomously as a school leader**

In the analysis of data in an earlier section of this report, principal autonomy was described as 'key to the enjoyment' of the principal role for several participants in the qualitative study. However, another set of participant responses puts autonomy in a relationship of tension with external accountabilities applied to principals and their work. Wendy captures something of the felt experience of this tension when she says, 'I feel that I get none of the support and all of the responsibility'.

Erica locates her current experience of this tension by drawing on the accountability dimension of the centrally led school improvement initiative:

> *When you're forced to work in ways that are not productive, and that don't bring about improvement in children's learning outcomes, then it's just something that you have to do. You have to toe the line, and it's a total waste of my time.*

Anton's observation captures more explicitly the relationship between externally imposed accountabilities and principal autonomy:

> *The accountability has probably gone up several notches … I think you've got all the autonomy you want until they want you to do something … until they've got an issue that they want you to solve, like they need this staff member placed with you or there's been some issue. 'What autonomy?' I say to myself.*

Amy provides a more nuanced perspective when she alludes to a conditional form of autonomy residing alongside of a need for compliancy and founded in expert local knowledge:

> *And when I say 'autonomy', I don't mean there's no expectations and we're not checked up on. There's certainly compliancy. But I think it's about complying in a way that is contextualised to the place that you work in. And I think that's where the autonomy comes in. I know my community, I know my staff, I know the areas where we need to cross every T and dot every I and the areas where we can be a bit more fluid.*

Principal participants in the qualitative project described principal autonomy as flowing from the decentralisation of decision making in matters such as staffing, planning and school structures. Direct references to autonomy in this study suggest that it is an important component of principal job satisfaction and contributes quite directly to principal perceptions of their strong and effective leadership. These references, however, rarely claim access to an unfettered and unequivocal version of autotomy. Rather, they most often contain more qualified descriptions about curtailed freedoms and intensification of accountability requirements. Notable amongst claims about accountability are:

i. references to a shift in the relationship between principals and Educational Directors with several principals noting a narrower focus and a more directive quality in the input of their line manager, and

ii. a desire amongst many principals to protect their leaders and teachers from the more pressing aspects of external accountabilities (see *Buffering staff from the effects of policy* later in this report).

Two extracts from Thomas' interview usefully illustrate these accountability claims. Thomas says:

> *I believe that the Education Directors are the political police force and they're caught between educational leadership and the compliance stuff from the Department. And it's about them making sure that every Principal does the job so nobody in the bureaucracy gets embarrassed. Command and control.*

Thomas then draws on his past experience to propose a different style of line management:

> *When I first started as a principal, the District Superintendent would come in and be supportive in your role in terms of how you were going and what supports you needed to do the job, because they didn't have a one size fits all approach back then. Every school and every community that you worked in was unique, and they still are, but we still have this one size fits all model that comes down from state office and you're supposed to implement it, and it just doesn't work. So you have to be given the opportunity as a leader to be supported in making local decisions.*

The literature provides additional insights into this tension. The expounded logic is, following Berkhout (2007), 'fundamentally shaped by the neo-liberalist discourse of the free market and the power of autonomous agents' (p. 411) and it submits that matters such as staffing, budget and planning, managed at school level, better respond to local accountabilities and produce outcomes that are more compatible with the specific needs of the community and the school's potential enrolment market. As Morley and Rassool (2002) note, 'responsibility is devolved and increased responsiveness to clients/customers is alleged' (p. 62). Thinking from a critical perspective, the types of autonomy described by principal participants can be considered a kind of mock empowerment, conferred on principals from above and accompanied by the authoritative gaze of supervisors more concerned with systemic requirements for alignment and conformity (see Wright, 2012).

When rendered paradoxically, the type of principal autonomy attached to neoliberal policy can be shown to have fabricated and deceptive qualities.

Figure 5: The paradox of principal autonomy

One of the ironies in granting apparent autonomies to principals – which over time has occurred in various diminished and expanded iterations on the South Australian state system – is that it has coincided with an extended period of unprecedented scrutiny and surveillance of schools, and of 'steering' the work of principals, by central office and its agencies. Paradoxically, the ostensible divestment of new powers to the principal and alleged improvements in responsiveness to communities and customers is more likely, in this dynamic, to manifest in performative responses from principals that cater more to the generic policy priorities of the system than to local needs. This 'steering from a distance' uses neoliberal technologies, such as centrally-imposed standards and accountability regimes, to affect a fundamental reworking of relations of power, where the prima facie appearance of principal autonomy arguably disguises the apportioning of greater powers centrally.

adapted from Dolan, C. (2020). *Paradox and the school leader: The struggle for the soul of the principal in neoliberal times.* Singapore: Springer

The tensions related to the management of underperforming staff

The tensions related to the management of underperforming staff

Arguably, the most heartfelt and frustrated responses from principal participants in the qualitative study centred on the management of underperforming staff. As Felicity, a secondary school principal, notes, 'The biggest issue we have in teaching and learning is incompetent teachers who are placed with us, and the difficulty we have in moving on people who are bad'. While the official process, embodied in the Department for Education policy guidelines *Managing Unsatisfactory Performance*, is the focus of a great deal of attention, principal participants also commented on associated issues related to curriculum, workload, stress levels and outcomes achieved.

The process for managing underperforming staff—which one principal describes as 'the pointy end' of performance and development— invokes a range of responses from participants. While recognised as 'a really important part of the work' and 'largely supportive' in the way it is structured, many responses highlight problems of time and workload, describing the process as 'just too difficult to manage', 'long-winded', 'very frustrating' and 'expensive'. Raymond provides a useful insight into using the process (or not) in his school:

> ***let's say I've got six people, who should probably be dealt with through that process. Having done it before with one teacher and having 18 months with that person and nothing happening and countless hours of documentation and weekly meetings, it would be near on impossible for me to manage that, with the five or six that I've got here without some help.***

Andrew's response to the process echoes that provided by Raymond but adds useful insights about how he thinks the process is weighted and its likely outcomes.

> ***Look, long term, it could be effective, short term, it's a drawn-out process that errs on the side of the underperforming person, not the principal, and it puts undue stress on the principal. Consequently, we've got a lot of people in our system who have moved around who haven't been put on the process because principals just don't want to go through it … It's likely to end with that person either resigning, retiring, being placed elsewhere, but not being at my site any longer.***

A lack of confidence in achieving the desired outcomes of the Managing Unsatisfactory Performance process – specifically, producing an improvement in the performance of the staff member being managed – seems to permeate many of responses of principal participants. For example, Anton notes, somewhat despairingly, that 'every effort that I have put into turning some individuals around has come to nothing', while Karen suggests that the principal might effect a shift in the desired outcomes when she claims that , 'I have in some cases been able to get people to get to a situation where they felt … actually teaching is not for me'. Amelia indicates a certain impatience with getting to the desired outcomes, by asserting 'I will not go backwards, even though the system says we have to give them that fair chance to come back and be refreshed. Yeah, no, no, no, no. There's only so many chances'.

The impetus for embarking on a process that principals understand to be time consuming, stressful and unlikely to yield its stated and preferred outcomes, appears to stem from the responsibility principals feel for the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. Anton sets this responsibility in the context of secondary curriculum provision in a country school:

> ***You ask what keeps me awake at night. When you have to make a compromise by appointing a teacher who you already know and who isn't going to be who you want and who isn't going to do your kids much good. It's that decision between: I'm going to put this person in place or I'm not going to offer Tech Studies at all. I'm going to put this person in place or I can't teach maths – oh, we have to teach maths so I haven't got any choice there. It's an incredibly difficult decision.***

While the responses quoted in this section highlight a series of tensions associated with principal management of unsatisfactory performance, the data gathered on this topic also contains several references to successful outcomes. These responses, while sporadic and exceptional, describe changes in attitude and commitment and

sustainable improvement in practice. At a different level, these positive responses also bring an equivocal quality to principal perspectives on managing underperformance, suggesting a productive understanding of the complexity of policy making in this area. They further suggest that the shared frustration of policymakers and principals might form a basis for the co-design and co-development of policy into the future. While principals also commented on numerous past iterations in this area of policy, the productive management of the tension it creates looms large for school leaders and, concomitantly, provides a strong incentive for their involvement in changing and improving future versions.

The tensions brought on by policies of choice, marketisation and competition

The tensions brought on by policies of choice, marketisation and competition

As a discourse of neoliberal policy, choice draws upon and intensifies the established logic that parents and students, as consumers of schooling, should be free to choose the school they think is best for them. A corollary to this logic is that schools work better when they are in competition with each other so that they 'are motivated and disciplined by market forces' (Buras & Apple, 2005, p. 551). In the Australian schooling system choice is expedited via data from high stakes testing (especially the NAPLAN) and systems of classification, comparison and ranking facilitated by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's (ACARA's) MySchool website.

While tensions related to high stakes testing / NAPLAN have already been discussed, several principal participants also identify *MySchool* as a source of tension. As a tool of comparison and ranking, Clare describes *MySchool* as 'a blunt instrument' and joins a number of other participants in identifying face-to-face visits, principal's tours, open nights etc as an antidote to any negative impressions created through the *MySchool* website. Asha hones in on the way sites are measured and compared in *MySchool* claiming that 'it creates this negative view of your school, and I can tell you, the families that don't want their children to come here will use it … they will look for the evidence and then will say things like, well your NAPLAN results are so poor'.

Perhaps the tension related to the marketisation of schools most often noted by principal participants is between a coherent and consistently high-quality state schooling system and the efforts of individual schools (both public and private) to compete successfully in the schooling market. This tension is illustrated by comments about tiered state schooling system and the residualisation of some schools, in particular, those in low SES communities. Clare talks of once being a principal 'in a low SES broken school' and of being 'distressed' after visiting schools that 'are in a mess'. She claims that 'until we have a system that is going to invest in leaders and really look at things like selection processes and really put in place strategic support for leaders, we will always have a two-tiered system'.

This observation is brought to life by the experiences that other principal participants recount. Karen provides an extended example of her efforts to attract students to her secondary school in a country community 'where more kids go to private school than public.' She indicates that 'often we don't even get a look at them' (potentially high achieving students) but that 'we get a cohort of kids who've been kicked out of those schools … or who don't fit that mould'. Marika relates the 'residualisation' of her school to the local presence of a large private school, thus setting the negative consequences for her school inside of choice / marketisation policy:

> ***we share a boundary fence with (a private) school. We are Category 3, and if we have a look at the students in our postcode, which is what the category is based on, and we take the top 15% of achievers within our postcode, (the private school) takes those. So, we are not really a category 3 school. We know that in schools, we need to have high achievers for other students to be able to achieve to a higher level - but attracting those students to our site is a really difficult process.***

While the presence of tension is indicated by these excerpts from interview, the great majority of principal participants in the project appear to be untroubled by the current governmental preference for policies that favour choice, marketisation and competition. For example, many interview responses suggest that increased enrolments are the currency of school and leadership success, and, concomitantly, that principals need to willingly embrace responsibilities associated with public relations, impression management and school promotion. Later in this report, a critically-oriented section titled *Principals as policy subjects: The shaping effects of (neoliberal) policy logics and technologies* will analyse principal responses—such as those made about choice, marketisation and competition—in terms of the constitutive effects of policy.

The tension between the need to sometimes oppose or resist centralised policy demands and the personal risks involved in such opposition and resistance

The need to sometimes oppose or resist centralised policy demands ⟷ **The personal risk involved in such opposition and resistance**

The simplified naming of this tension belies a range of complexities associated with resistance and risk and, at the same time, fails to capture the variety and nuance in the responses of principal participants to questions about the personal, professional and political implications of acts such as 'speaking out' or 'pushing back'. In the first instance, rather than trying to capture this tension by using extracts from interviews, this section focuses on a model for understanding the variables in play. In the next section, *The policy work of principals*, the voice of principals from the study is used more fully to explore how some principals work productively in spaces where they understand practices of opposition and dissension may be needed.

Two variables, devised from data analysis, show some of the complexities of this issue and, subsequently, form the basis for a model of principal participation in policy work.

Seeing the need – principal curiosity: The capacity of principals to fashion any type of policy work of their own rests, in the first instance, on their recognising that political positioning is needed. Levels of recognition vary significantly amongst participants in the qualitative project, both in terms of whether or not they think they need to act and, for those who affirm the need, what forms of action they should take. The notion of 'seeing the need' is usefully supported by thinking about variations in the levels of curiosity principals hold for their political work and political actions. Following Foucault (2000):

> ***[Curiosity] evokes 'care'; it evokes the care one takes of what exists and what might exist; a sharpened sense of reality, but one that is never immobilized before it; a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing; a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental. (p. 325)***

Setting this reading against the range of responses of principals in the qualitative project, it is possible to think of principals as being located on a 'curiosity continuum'. The most incurious, for example, do not see any need 'to throw off familiar ways of thought', are untroubled by the status quo and supportive of policy directions that support and entrench it. Further along the continuum, various levels of interest emerge in 'looking at the same thing in a different way' and in practices that reflect more inquisitive positioning and more participative and resistant participation.

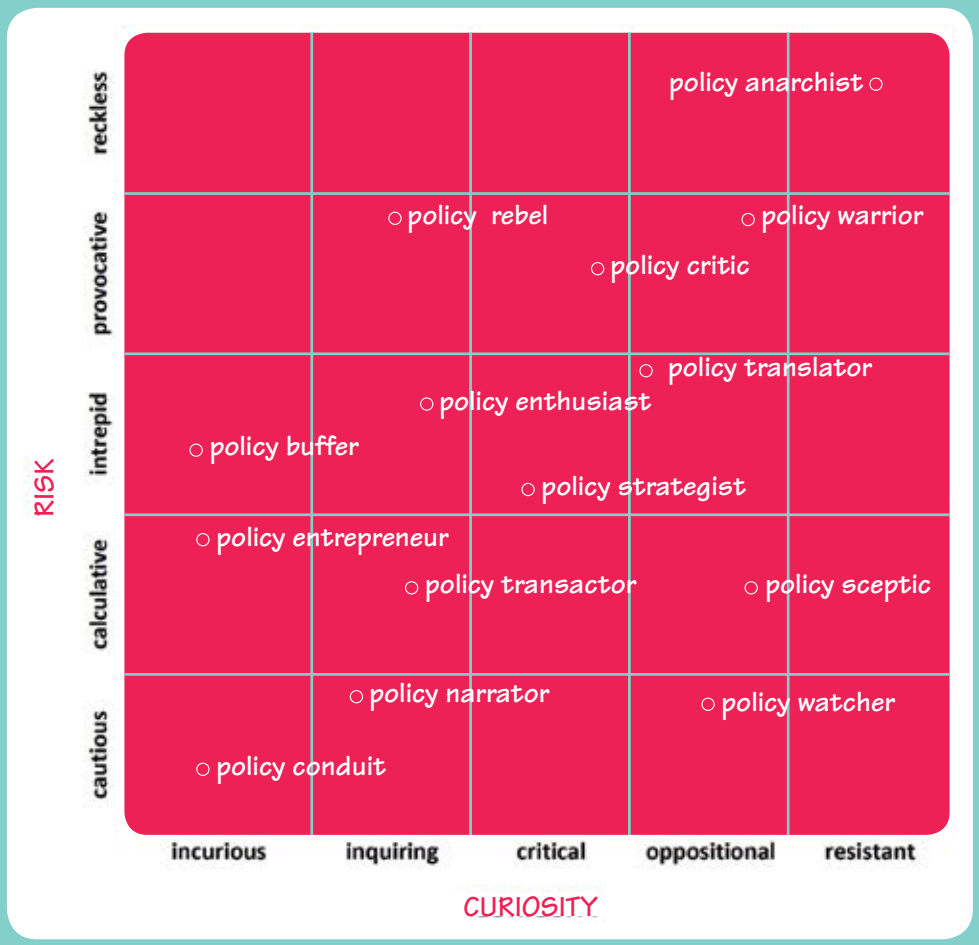
Taking the risk: As well as variations in curiosity about their political work, evidence from the qualitative project suggests principals have widely varying perceptions of the risks involved in doing this work and, relatedly, propensities for taking these perceived risks.

Again, it is possible to think of a continuum, with the various inclinations to risk-taking construed as an important variable, for example, in thinking about whether principals:

- are inclined to risk-averse behaviours and positions because they understand political actions (such as pushing back and resistance) as disloyal or as adversely affecting their career;
- feel they will be unsupported and more vulnerable when they embark on risky behaviours or take up adversarial positions;
- are restricted to thinking about the possibilities for being oppositional or resistant rather than taking action.

The model shown in Figure 6 uses the variables of *curiosity* and *risk* to try to capture a range of subject positions for principals as policy workers.

Figure 6: Risk, curiosity and principal policy work



While claiming an inductive quality through its use of data gathered in this study, this model is not intended to form strict categories of principals as political types or to imply that some subject positions are more valuable than others. Rather, the inclusion of this model is to promote discussion and to extend the analytical possibilities in considering the variables in play and their contribution to a more nuanced and productive depiction of principal's policy work.

At a meta-functional level this model is also useful for illustrating how policy work can be interpreted as a marker of the heterogenous character of the broader principal group. It may be argued that this heterogeneity is so patently obvious (for example, as a self-evident quality of the data set collected in this research) that it does not need to be highlighted. However, in a discussion of principal policy work, foregrounding the great variation amongst principals in style, personality, personal politics, skills and expertise, experience and interests becomes an important antidote to the forces of homogeneity that currently shape principals and their work. (Neoliberal) policy technologies of standardisation, accountability and performativity assume and promote a sameness and consistency across the principal cohort as an idealised way of construing all principals as willing and compliant subjects, keen to offer unencumbered support to the aspirations of policy makers. The model (Figure 6) helps depict a different and more complex picture.

c) The policy work of principals

The qualitative study collected and analysed data about the constraints and demands placed on principals by policy developed and imposed from the outside as well as principal responses to 'the problem of meaning' and their school-based practices as 'receivers and agents' of policy (Saunders, 1987, p. 108, in Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011, p. 625).

The grammar of *policy subjects* and *policy actors* (see Figure 7) is useful in understanding the particular subject/actor positions formed when principals are made 'the object of political and governmental activity because the position they hold in schools makes them mediators and translators of government policy' (Gobby, 2017, p. 86).

The terms *policy subject* and *policy actor* are not used pejoratively or to imply that principals are policy dupes working at the behest of central bosses. Rather, they are to help understand the policy work of principals in a way that takes account of the complex relationship that Bernstein (1996) describes between the 'official' field 'created and dominated by the state' and the 'pedagogic field' occupied by 'pedagogues in schools' (p. 48).

The productive 'space' of policy enactment

Many of the tensions described in the previous section of this report either originate from, or are catalysed by, the competing interests of centralised policy makers and local school leaders. A strong theme emerging from the qualitative study is the recognition amongst interviewees that these competing interests form a productive space in which principals are able to do policy work on behalf of their schools.

The ongoing susceptibility of centralised policy to local influence and interpretation is nicely captured by Rizvi and Lingard (2009) when they link the aspirations of policy makers with the complexity of practice:

> **Policy desires or imagines change – it offers an imagined future state of affairs, but in articulating desired change always offers an account somewhat more simplified than the actual realities of practice. (p. 5)**

Policy subjects and policy actors

The term *policy subjects* evokes the work of subjectivation – especially as it is imposed on principals by the 'taken-for-granted and implicit knowledges and assumptions' (Bailey, 2013, p. 814) and the 'network of social practices … infused with power relations' (Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011, p. 611) inside the symbolic order of neoliberal policy discourses. *Policy subjects* also suggest that new subject positions might emerge when principals locate themselves in 'outside' fields and think differently about how policy discourses shape them.

The designation of *policy actors* shifts attention from discourse to practice by paying regard to the 'complex and differentiated activity' of principals in shaping 'the "responses" of schools to and their work *with* policy' (Ball et al., 2011, p. 625, italics in original). In relation to outside pressures to audit, appraise and adjudge these responses, it includes the work of principals in communicating the best possible performance of themselves and their school as a measure of productivity, quality and worth (see Ball, 2006, p. 144). The term policy actor also invokes the 'complex conditions of possibility' (Walkerdine & Bansel, 2010, p. 16) in principal performance when extra-local and local variations create differently mediated contests over policy.

Figure 7: Policy subjects and policy actors

In data from the qualitative study, many principal participants acknowledged their roles as 'policy subject' and 'policy actor' in noting the simultaneous presence of pressure exerted from the outside (e.g. from central office and regional personnel) to conform and comply with policy directives and a personal desire to assert their leadership through various interruptive and interpretive processes of policy enactment at site level. Figure 8 is a collection of terms used by principal participants to describe what they do in the policy enactment 'space'. While it is not possible to capture the full complexity of each of the strategies implied in Figure 8, the following excerpts from interview capture in more detail some of the policy work that principals undertake.

Figure 8: What principals do in the policy 'space'

One commonly employed tactic is to diminish the importance of certain policy requirements. For example:

> *I believe that NAPLAN is purely for the department. It's a measure for the department. I don't personally see any purpose of it here at school. It is a one-off test, and we use the results with other things. But a lot of our students really struggle with it, because they're so used to, in a classroom, having the support of the teacher if they're having an issue (Denise)*

> *With NAPLAN, we know we have to do it ... last night we had a governing council meeting and I just mentioned that we are in NAPLAN week and I said, 'you just have to remember that it's a snapshot. Your child's destiny is not going to be determined by their NAPLAN result. Forget about the emphasis that is put out through the media and some Departments around the importance of it'. I always, every year write in the newsletter ... I have a little spiel about, while the NAPLAN will give us an idea of how your child's going, it's just one little bit of evidence that our teachers have in terms of knowing what your child's about. What it won't tell us is how creative they are, how friendly they are, how talented they are in music (Isabella)*

The various processes of contextualising and modifying (and sometimes ignoring) policy to suit local circumstances form a consistent thread in the data. For example:

> *What I do is I learn words, and I learn new words. It's a lot about how you frame things and how you sort of tweak it. This is my three o'clock in the morning thinking, we need to do this, how can I make that work in the context of what we'd already decided we wanted to do? And, I think that's a lot of the principal's work (Felicity)*

How we get to some of the expectations of the system is flexible to us ... I look at it [policy], figure out which bits we have to comply with and which bits I can ignore without causing too much grief to anyone (Amy).

> *... there's lots of scope for me to individualise policy to my site. My work is then to determine how that's implemented. If it's going to be implemented, looking at my cohort of kids, looking at my staff and working through to get to an end point that is satisfactory for the department, but is also beneficial to my site and it's going to work at my site ... everything that comes across my table has some sort of change about it by the time it's implemented. (Andrew)*

> *I think what I do with everything that comes our way is extract from it what's going to support my work. I will nod and tick off what has to be done, generally, in a timely manner. If something comes that really doesn't make sense to me, I will sometimes park it. And if I'm not reminded about it, it can just disappear until I am reminded. So I think it's about working out from all of those policy decisions, what's going to have the greatest impact on the work that I'm doing? (Amelia)*

Questions about acts of resistance, recalcitrance and pushing back in the face of policy demands (e.g. those that are perceived as unreasonable, unfair or unhelpful) receive more nuanced and varied responses. They raise questions not only about the nature and efficacy of these acts, but also about the balancing of risk and reward, and the propensity and capacity of individuals to undertake this work. The following excerpts from interview capture some of this complexity:

> *Quite simply, if you're on about your school community and a departmental initiative does not add value or compromises what your school community has decided, you have the responsibility to push back … I guess at my stage of my career I have the confidence to not worry about what might be seen as a career limiting move … it is just about being and having a passion for your school community. (Jessica)*

> *I leverage central office policy to benefit the outcomes of the kids and the staff and the community. Leveraging the policies to support staff and protect them. Leveraging policy to protect myself, and provide I guess a buffer to say 'no' sometimes, I can't do that because … (Raymond)*

> *I think by having been around for a while and being experienced, I know when to stand up and when to say stuff and which is the hill to die on. And, that's why I fear for some of the newer principals who just toe the party line. And look, genuinely, I'm okay with most of the stuff that comes from the department, but when I'm not, I'll stand up, and I think I've been around long enough and people know me well enough that if I am saying, "Well enough's enough". So I don't have a problem with doing that when I need to. (Andrew)*

> *you have to sort of throw some hand grenades into the mix sometimes just to disrupt things. If you've got a good working relationship, and people trust you, you can do that and they won't be up in arms about it. But if you get that wrong, in terms of the timing or how big the hand grenade is it can cause all sorts of issues (Lee)*

The sentiments expressed by Jessica, Raymond, Andrew and Lee contrast quite sharply with Denise's response to a question about balancing requirements imposed from outside of her school with her loyalty to her local school community:

> *That question gets asked all the time from my staff, to be honest. I do feel the pressure from the Department, if this or that has to be done, I don't really have any leeway. And staff have often said to me, 'well, why do you have to do it? Why can't you just say no?' and I've just said, 'well, I wouldn't like the person above me to go, "well your job is on the line"'.*

Amy provides further insights into what she calls 'the risks of speaking up and out':

> *there's a lot of belief or urban myths around, you won't get your job back. Yeah. I mean I'm not worried, because nobody wants my job. But I do think there is a real difference in the confidence of principals in general to speak up and out based on where they are in their career.*

While it is impossible to capture definitive observations from the diffuse and heterogenous data collected about policy enactment in this project, the Paradox of policy implementation (Figure 9) serves as a useful reminder of the potential for principals to create some agency in their policy work and to find the spaces of freedom needed to better shape that work on behalf of their local communities.

Figure 9: The paradox of policy implementation

Systemically, principals are cast as willing and apolitical subjects, charged with the process of policy implementation at school level. The expectation that the principal will be a conduit for centrally mandated directives and work to keep the intentions of policy-makers intact is conveyed as natural and unproblematic. Paradoxically, the primacy allocated to principals as policy subjects may actually work against desired consistency and homogeneity when precise implementation expectations come into tension with processes variously described as *translation, enactment* and *settlement* at site level. Principals are at once cognisant of both their systemic and legislative responsibilities and the need to respond to local mandates to adapt, diminish and even ignore central directives so that policy better meets the needs of their school. This puts principals at the centre of competing political interests where they can fashion opportunities for re-interpreting, challenging and changing policy, while necessarily espousing compliance (Berkhout, 2007, p. 408).

Strength in numbers – the importance of associations and alliances

Earlier references to the risk and insecurity associated with political practices such as critique and resistance seem to find an antidote, in this research, in the work of various alliances, associations and groups to which principals belong. Several participants contrast the possibilities for individual action in policy work with the broader and more effective options that emerge when principals (and other leaders) caucus together around a common concern or for a common purpose. For example, Clare highlights the importance of having 'an advocacy body' and goes on to say 'I think the combined voice has more clout than just one single leader'. The weight of responses in this area were directed to the work of the peak principal associations (i.e. SAPPA and SASPA) with many participants strongly supportive of the work of these bodies and grateful for a political voice that would otherwise not be available to them as individuals. While too numerous to cite in full, something of the breadth of purposes principals find in their associations is captured in the selection of interview extracts in Figure 10.

Figure 10: SAPPA and SASPA: some perspectives from the field

I think SASPA's been a really strong lobby force. SASPA's position with the department is don't ask us after you've already made the decision to respond. Let us be a part of the decision making. (Jessica)

SAPPA are actually fantastic. Very powerful, I believe. … they will often put out an email saying, 'Hey, we're about to talk with staffing on this issue. If you've got any feedback, give it to us'. (Andrew)

The collegiality is something I feel quite dependent on. The networking, the opportunity to ask questions without judgement because, you know intrinsically that everybody's learning at the same time and nobody's got all the answers. (Amelia)

I met with (the Minister for Education) recently and I said, 'you know, you really need to listen to Principals and SASPA/SAPPA because they are the voice of the leaders who are doing it day in and day out'. (Thomas)

I suppose (having a voice back up to the system) is where we rely on our agencies like SAPPA. I have worked with them very closely before when I've had an issue here at my site. I find they are a great agency to be able to go to if you have a question. (Denise)

I joined SAPPA because I didn't feel I was confident. I couldn't talk the leadership talk that I felt other principals could. I thought that would be a way of me becoming a little bit more confident in this role and seeing myself as a leader of a school. But also just to get an idea of broader issues and things that are happening around schools. (Isabella)

I think without SASPA we would have almost no voice really. (Raymond)

I think it's really encouraging to see the work that is happening at SASPA. I always felt like it had a strong influence, but now that I've got a bit more of an understanding of the inner workings, my belief in the strength of the influence is much greater. (Felicity)

I choose to be part of SAPPA, I choose to be part of a lot of professional learning communities, I choose to network with people who I see as my colleagues, peers, like-minded. I feel connected to those groups, and those people because I have a voice and they listen. (Wendy)

The seemingly unconditional regard for SAPPA and SASPA evident in comments in Figure 10 is balanced somewhat by other input, for example, describing a sense of despondency about the capacity of the principals associations to be heard and to be able to make much difference at system level and concerns about the associations being compromised because of funding provided to them by central office. Erica claims, 'the department partly funds these associations, and so they're gagged – they just don't have the political clout that they had'. Thomas also equates the funding issue with a weakening of SAPPA's and SASPA's voice in central office interactions. He says of SAPPA and SASPA, 'even with all this push from the principals and the skills and experience and knowledge within that group, they're not being listened to'. He goes on to describe how senior bureaucrats use a 'get back in your box' directive when a contentious issue is raised. Thomas proposes the following course of action:

> ***I think that we've got to be self-funded and raise our fees, so we're not beholden to them –because while you're beholden to the employer there's always going to be those issues you can't raise.***

In addition to, and at times in conjunction with, the work of the peak associations, several participants describe the importance they attached to their membership of other groups and alliances. Amongst the groups mentioned, the most concerted and positive references are to district secondary principal alliances and their capacity to strongly represent the voice of principals on local issues. This representation is variously described as 'sometimes having some clout', 'trying to bring some pressure to bear', being 'given a voice' and 'providing an extra layer or level of authority to individuals'. Several principals also mention how the backing of these alliances helps build their personal confidence in dealing with issues and provides opportunities for individuals to speak with greater authority on behalf of their local colleagues.

Without providing a full account of their importance, the data from this study also positively references some other alliances and groupings, including SAPPA talk (especially the capacity of this online chatlist to raise new issues, generate discussion and support the wellbeing of colleagues), the Partnerships (including a growing interest in some country Partnerships to use these centrally endorsed groupings to formulate local positions and advocate on behalf of their memberships) and the South Australian State School Leaders Association (SASSLA) (especially the different voice and different perspectives it might provide from that of SAPPA/SASPA and the Australian Education Union).

Other policy work themes

As interview responses about principal's policy work ranged widely, it is not possible to capture the full breadth and depth of the data gathered. However, four other themes can be distilled from the data:

1. Consideration of consequences:

As principal participants provided observations about significant centrally developed policy initiatives affecting their lives and work, a common theme involved the failure of policy makers to take a full account of the consequences of implementation at site level. As Clare succinctly notes, 'there is no understanding of the impact of policy on the school site'. Similarly, Jessica observes that 'you cannot assume that because someone in central office put something out they've actually really thought through how it plays out in a school context'.

Many observations of consequences relate to requirements imposed on principals by a centrally developed school improvement model and the failure of the policy-making arm to properly consider the consequences of site implementation. Participants claim that the implementation process failed to properly take account of:

i. the time needed by principals and teachers to put the initiative into place

ii. increased levels of stress precipitated by unforeseen shifts in workload, favoured pedagogical approaches and resource allocations

iii. attachment to, and ongoing investment in, existing planning models and processes

iv. the need to develop school-based processes allied to the new requirements for school improvement.

Beyond these observations about the school improvement initiative, principal participants also claimed a certain indifference, centrally, to the consequences of site implementation in policy areas such as student enrolments, infrastructure improvement and catering for students with special needs. A further consequence, popularly cited, can be found in the efforts principals make to mitigate and manage policy effects in ways that minimise their effects on others. This 'buffering' of policy effects was another common theme in the data.

2. Buffering staff from the effects of policy:

Felicity is very clear about her reasons for assuming a 'protecting the people' role in the face of outside policy demands. She describes a group of teachers 'with clear goals and all the work they need to do in mind' and says that her intervention 'to manage the stuff from the outside' is so that 'it doesn't upset the agreements we've made and the directions that we've decided we want to head in together'. Amy reports a slightly different rationale when she claims that always following the central office directive to 'send out to all staff' would inundate her teachers with a lot of material that they don't need or want. She outlines her role as a discerning sorter of information from the outside and notes that 'if I send them too much fluff, they're not going to pay attention to the stuff I actually want them to read'.

The numerous other references to the 'buffering', 'filtering' and 'shielding' work of principals are tied almost exclusively to protecting teachers from outside pressures so that they can continue their classroom work unencumbered. Marika describes a responsibility to 'support teachers to be able to get on with their job of teaching and learning and trying to get all of the other stuff out of their jobs for them' while Max says he 'filters' outside policy directives to make sure 'teachers don't feel overwhelmed, or that they have a sense of sudden swings or changes in direction that they can't understand'. Adding a workload dimension, Isabella points out that she would be reneging on the tacit agreement she has with staff about keeping a suitable work/life balance if she didn't protect their teaching time by either 'filtering out' extraneous work or 'figuring out a way that we can include it that isn't going to raise the hackles'.

3. Leveraging policy for local advantage:

In a variation on the earlier discussion about the surreptitious and, at times, subversive local work of principals in the policy 'space', several interviewees described how they gain leverage from central directives that is above and in addition to that which they can rally using their personal influence as a leader. Felicity, for example, describes leveraging from of a particular requirement of the broader system:

> ***I've been finding it difficult to get traction around a more formalised process of performance management, and so the performance and development plan being sort of compulsory, if you like, and the reminders that come through the emails to say you haven't updated it, have made it really easy for me to say, 'look, this is not just me, this is a department', so that has actually worked out really well.***

Several other perspectives are offered on the idea of principals gaining some advantage from outside directives. Andrew claims that 'when someone from the outside says "here's what needs to happen" that's a

pretty powerful card to play [and it] makes my job much easier to head the school in the direction that we want to be heading in'. Isabella hints at a more personal advantage in leveraging outside help to get her work done, when she says, 'I'll pass the buck, I will blame the Department and say, "Don't take it out on me. Don't shoot the messenger"' Along similar lines, Karen says that she sometimes asks central office to 'just tell us what to do and we'll do it' and then tells her school leader colleagues that 'we don't have any choice in this'. This strategy, she surmises, 'is a little easier than consulting with the local crew'.

4. The shaping effects of policy:

The self-referencing quality of the interview as a method of data collection, means that it is difficult to gain insights into the constitutive forces that operate on and within the interviewee. In the context of this project, it could be asserted that principal participants are not well placed to reflect critically on how they are shaped by currently favoured policy discourses, how they shape themselves inside of those discourses or how they derive their identity and power from those discourses (see Butler, 2005). To avoid straying beyond the parameters of what this project looked to find out, just three brief observations are offered from the data about the shaping effect that policy might have on principals:

- In the push to standardisation of education – through products like the Australian Curriculum, NAPLAN testing, the MySchool website and professional standards for teachers and principals – several research participants indicated that control over the conduct of teachers and students has shifted towards a pre-eminent and calculative principal responsibility. The data shows that matters of school image and status, enrolment numbers, competitive advantage and principal reputation and selection are now increasingly tied to measurable targets and expectations set by centralised policy and its makers.

- In interview, many principals claim a 'with/against' approach to tensions instated by policies supporting an increasingly competitive and marketised schooling environment. Trapped by the common-sense logic of these policies, however, principal critique of their negative effects on equity and fairness is often dwarfed by the need to be bold participants in the business of marketing, impression management and promotion, even when the playing field is tilted against them. Following the voices of principals in this study, to hold on to an 'against' position and to continue to critique the status quo, would work against the interests (and, in some cases, viability) of their schools.

- The NAPLAN test was singled out by many as flawed, overblown in importance and unfair in the judgements it allows about the quality of schools. In light of its expanded purposes, several principals in this study expressed frustration at their loss of control over the test and its local deployment as a source of feedback for teachers and students. As described earlier in this report, many now see the NAPLAN, and the many uses to which NAPLAN data is directed, as emblematic of a shift towards a more centralist system and to perceptions of the work of principals as being more technician-oriented, data-informed and accountability driven.

To conclude, Amy provides the following insights into the role of NAPLAN in a low SES setting, leaving little doubt of the constitutive importance of this policy 'technology' on her own identity and work as a principal:

> ***If success for this school is going to be based on children achieving the higher bands for NAPLAN, and I never want to say, 'I don't think my kids can get there', but statistically there's so much research … we will never ever be what's considered an inspiring and inspirational school [referencing the Department's Stages of Improvement initiative]. We may have one or two inspirational kids, or three or four, but as a whole school, that isn't even a goal that we can aspire to. Statistically it's just not possible. I am told I am principal of a 'build foundation' school, which means that, according to NAPLAN results, we are at the very beginning of improving students' literacy, and that there's a five level scale and that's the lowest grade, so to speak, well that's how it feels. We have been really brutally honest with our staff that we don't believe that that is a fair judgement of our success. I like to use the analogy of golf because in golf you get a handicap, to make it a fair game. In footy, the lowest team gets the first draft picks. I don't get any of those as a low SES school.***

PART 4:

The Quantitative study

The quantitative study formed the second part of the empirical work undertaken in this research project. As described earlier, the content and design of the quantitative project drew heavily from the initial analysis of data in the qualitative study. Methodologically, a sound defence for this mixed-method approach can be found in the congruence it enabled between project parts and, by extension, the coherence it brought to the overall project. Following Muijs (2004) the collection of numerical data provided the project with a 'quantitative answer' to questions raised in the qualitative study and increased confidence in generalising the findings of this research to a broader principal population (p. 6).

Survey development and content validity

The quantitative study was based on a survey administered through the online survey software, Qualtrics. A series of variables derived from data collected in the qualitative study formed the basis for the initial draft of this survey. In an extended application of the earlier described 'reflexive pragmatism' (Alvesson, 2010), questions best answered using quantitative methods were decided and structured, and opportunities to build from the qualitative project were sought.

While the questions devised in planning for this research remained pertinent throughout, data collection and analysis in the qualitative project quite naturally created additional lines of inquiry and, by extension, more questions to be addressed in the quantitative study. To help capitalise on a range of variables derived from data in the qualitative study, the following additional questions were developed in support of a wider framing of the project in its second stage:

- How prominent are tensions in the lives and work of principals?
- What strategies do principals adopt to manage tension?
- How do principals understand themselves as policy workers?
- What perceptions do principals hold of their own levels of political interest and engagement?

In addition to parameters provided by the qualitative study, the content and construct validity of the survey instrument were further addressed by:

i. circulating drafts of the survey to the stakeholder groups in the project for comment and feedback

ii. trialling the final approved draft of the survey with 10 volunteer principals (5 primary and 5 secondary).

As a result of these processes, various iterations of the survey were developed to address measurement issues of validity and reliability, as well as related improvements to the wording and expression of questions. The final version of survey, including instructions to participants, was approved in text form before being published to the online survey software, Qualtrics.

Survey completion

The survey was launched on Sunday 13 October and was closed on Sunday 17 November. 369 principals (i.e. all principal members of SAPPA and SASPA) were invited by email to take part. While the sample formed as a census of all principal members of SASPA and SAPPA, a completion rate of just under 50 percent meant that 180 principals completed the survey.

Figure 11 shows part of the information provided to participating principals prior to their commencement of the survey and includes information about the purposes of the survey and its design and structure.

Part 4:

About the survey

Thank you for taking part in this survey. The survey forms the second of two phases of data collection for the project (the first being an interview study already conducted with selected principals). The aim of the survey is to collect data that helps reveal

i. the tensions that principals commonly experience and manage, and

ii. how these tensions inform the policy and political work that principals undertake.

This is an anonymous survey, which means that your identity is protected and at no time will you be asked to supply your name or any other identifying information. Neither you, your school nor any of its personnel will be identified in any report of the results of the survey.

The questions in the survey draw from the relevant literature and from data gathered in the recent interview study of principals undertaken as part 1 of this joint project. The survey is divided into 5 sections:

Section 1: You, your school and your principalship

Section 2: What causes you tension?

Section 3: What are your strategies for managing tension?

Section 4: What type of policy worker are you?

Section 5: Your political interest and engagement

The survey should take a maximum of 20 minutes to complete. If you don't have 20 minutes to complete the survey now, you can make a start then come back to finish it - so long as you use the same computer. The survey won't count as finished until you have answered all of the questions.

Figure 11: Information provided to participants in the quantitative study

PART 5:

Observations from the quantitative study

Characteristics of the respondents and their schools

Over a period of 6 weeks, 180 principals completed the survey, a response rate of 49%. The survey instrument contained questions intended to produce specific demographic data about the principal respondents and their schools. The table (Figure 12) below and information on the following page show this data.

Gender	Female	Male	Total no. respondents	180
	112 (62%)	68 (38%)		

Age of principal participants	<30	30-40	40-50	50-60	>60
	2 (1%)	15 (8%)	35 (19%)	73 (40%)	56 (31%)

Number of tenures as a principal	None[1]	One	Two	Three	Four or more
	7 (4%)	63 (35%)	42 (23%)	29 (16%)	39 (22%)

Years as principal in current school	<1 year	1-3 yrs	4-6 yrs	7-10 yrs	11-13 yrs	13 years
	19 (11%)	63 (35%)	56 (31%)	25 (14%)	7 (4%)	10 (6%)

Expecting to retire/ resign … this tenure	Yes	No	Unsure
	34 (19%)	106 (60%)	38 (21%)

Figure 12: Characteristics of respondents

Whilst data collected on the gender of respondents (i.e. 62% female, 38% male) gives a broad sense of the respondents, the remainder of the demographic data collected provides insights into the individual principals. This data, while depicting a desirable range of respondents across categories, also reflects a specific interest, expressed in stakeholder group planning, in the relationship between levels of principal experience (as expressed in variables such as age, number of tenures as principal, years as principal and retirement expectations) and the likelihood or otherwise of principals engaging in various political practices. This relationship is captured in the hypothesis *that more experienced principals respond differently to the demands of policy than less experienced principals.*

This demographic data creates a range of analytic categories and seemingly rich possibilities for cross-tabulation with other variables in the quantitative study. Later in this report, some of the more noteworthy observations from this type of comparative analysis are highlighted. However, a general assertion seems to hold, that the most telling 'findings' from this work are derived from treating the respondents in this study as a single cohort.

Figures 13 -16 show the make up the participant group in terms of school characteristics (i.e. school location, type of school, size of school and index of disadvantage).

[1] e.g. the principal respondent is currently acting in the position.

Figure 13: School type

School type	%	Count
Primary	58%	105
Secondary	24%	43
R-12	12%	21
Special	0%	0
Other (e.g. P-7)	6%	11
Total	100%	180

Figure 14: Category of disadvantage

Category	Count (%)
1	11 (6%)
2	33 (18%)
3	21 (12%)
4	28 (16%)
5	33 (18%)
6	30 (17%)
7	24 (13%)

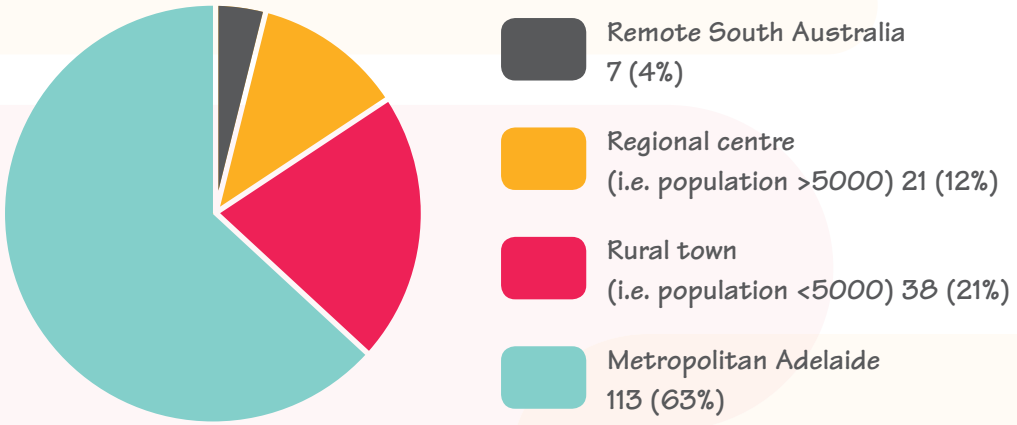


Figure 15: School location

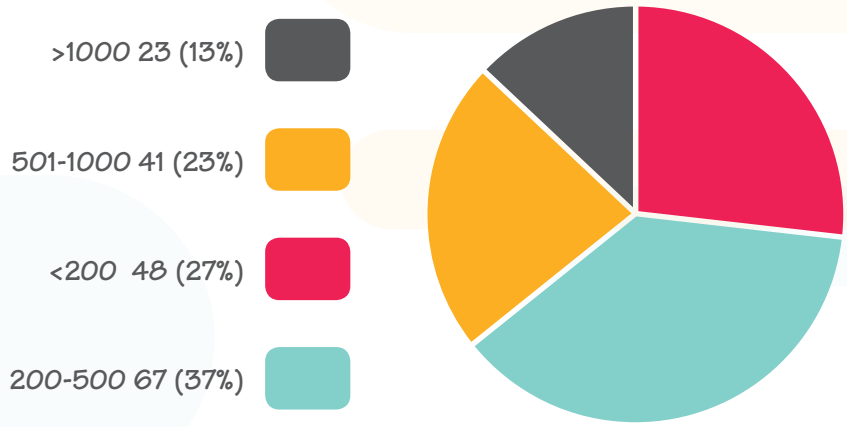


Figure 16: School size

The causes of tension

Using the data gathered and analysed in the qualitative study as well as input from principal reference groups and Board members of SAPPA and SASPA, the possible causes of tension amongst principals were identified and formulated for inclusion in the quantitative survey. In the survey, respondents were provided with the information in Figure 17 and asked to rate each tension using the scale shown.

Counting 'Very often' as (5), 'Often' (4),'Sometimes' (3), 'Rarely' (2) and 'Never' (1), and using the groupings from the survey, Figure 18 is a list of each of the tensions, showing:

The term 'tensions' is used in this survey to refer to competing interests and ideas and the associated presence of conflict, contradiction and ambiguity in the lives and work of principals. This section aims to identify those tensions that you experience most often.

How often do you experience tension in relation to the following? *please make one choice in each row*

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
○	○	○	○	○

Figure 17: Information provided to respondents re tensions

- mean score: the average score for each tension (i.e. the sum of the values divided by the number of values)
- standard deviation (SD): average of how the full distribution of scores deviates from the mean.

System membership

Mean	SD	
3.4	0.84	The tension between loyalt y to the broader system and the need to speak out on behalf of my school and / or local community
3.4	0.99	The tension between expectations of my leadership held by my employer and those held by staff, students and parents of my school
3.3	1.24	The tension between the system's goals and priorities and the goals and priorities of my school
2.8	1.14	The tension between competition and collaboration with neighbouring schools

Autonomy and accountability

Mean	SD	
3.9	0.94	The tensions arising from school complexity and workload, and related issues of mental health and wellbeing
3.6	0.98	The tension between the system's approach to risk management and my desire to be enterprising and innovative locally
3.5	0.90	The tension between the external accountabilities applied to me and my work and my need to act autonomously as a school leader
3.5	0.92	The tension between top-down decision-making at systems level and my capacity to make decisions with and on behalf of my school

Leadership

Mean	SD	
4.3	0.82	The tension between being the leader of teaching and learning in your school and attending to the daily demands of your job (e.g. in crisis management, conflict resolution, administrative requirements)
3.6	0.88	The tension in decision-making between showing strong and decisive leadership and being collaborative (e.g. by taking account of a range of perspectives)
3.0	1.01	The tension between leadership models which position the principal as the singular, authoritative head of the school and models that advocate greater distribution and sharing of leadership responsibility
2.8	1.01	The tension between the styles of leadership that are currently favoured and endorsed (e.g. in professional learning, policy and school leadership literature) and your personal, preferred style

Policy environment

Mean	SD	
3.6	1.03	The tension between excellence (e.g. in policies focussed on student achievement) and equity (e.g. in promoting learning opportunities for all students)
3.4	1.09	The tension brought on by policies favouring marketisation and competition (e.g. in relations between schools, in the comparing and ranking of schools, in issues related to parental choice / school enrolments)
3.3	1.02	The tension between the purposes of schooling expressed in system-wide policy and the purposes of schooling to which you subscribe and which you promote locally
3.1	0.89	The tension between a need to sometimes oppose or resist the system-wide policy demands and the personal risks involved in such opposition or resistance

Personnel management

Mean	SD	
4.0	0.94	The tensions arising from school complexity and workload, and related issues of mental health and wellbeing
3.7	0.91	The tension between the management of underperforming staff and the accountability requirements of underperformance policy
3.7	0.94	The tension between industrial agreements about staff workloads / conditions and the capacity to create the best conditions for school improvement
3.1	0.95	The tension between formal processes of performance management and appraisal and the need to provide a trusting and supportive school / working environment

Figure 18: List of tensions showing mean score and standard deviation

The summary data provided above helps address the question posed in the introduction to the quantitative study about the prominence tensions in the lives and work of principal. Within the five categories of tensions shown, the descriptive statistic of *mean* provides the central tendency for individual tensions, while *standard deviation*, as a measure of dispersion, shows how spread out the data are about the mean, thus helping explain potential variations for each distribution. Taken together, these measures provide useful insights into the different categories of tension shown. For example, working from the 5-point scale used in the survey, the prominence of mean scores above 3.0 across all categories shows that most respondents experience these tensions 'sometimes', 'often' or 'very often'. For the twenty tensions listed, only two have a mean score of less than 3.0 suggesting that tension is a pervasive presence for many.

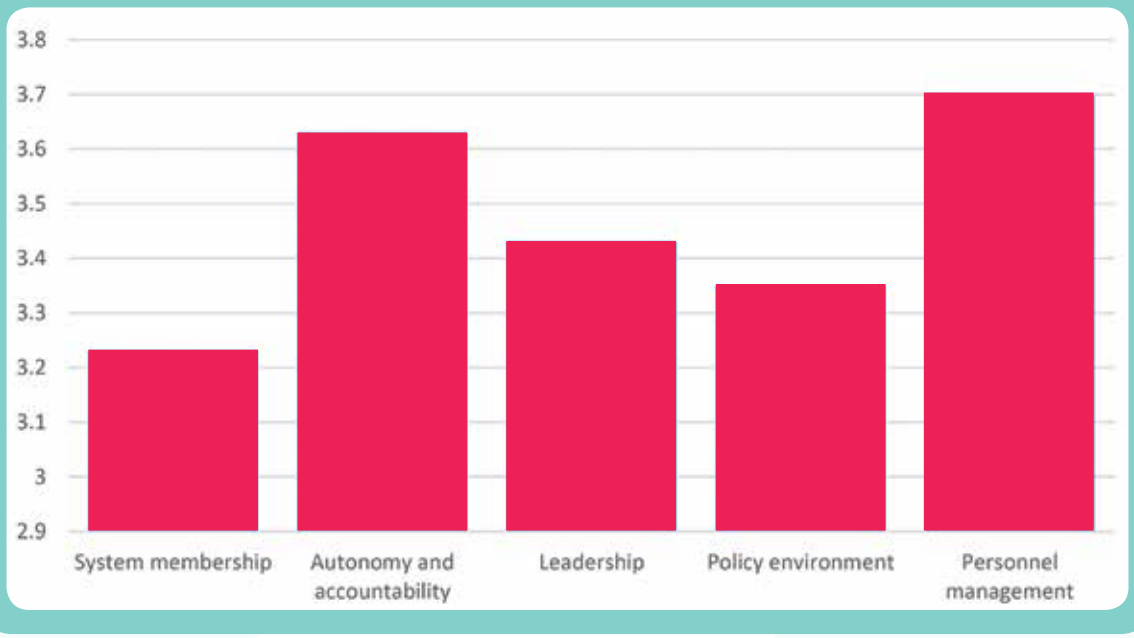
The central tendency (i.e. *mean*) data is:

i. supportive of the proposition that principals experience a range of tensions in their lives and work, and

ii. affirms the categories of tension used in the survey.

The following table, Figure 19, depicts the average mean score for each of these categories, and sheds some further light on principal experiences by suggesting diverse origins of the various tensions, ranging from macro-policy requirements through to in-school and personal / professional concerns. Viewed in conjunction with the graphs showing 'The top 4 tensions' which follow, this graph of average mean scores also suggests that many tensions involve the interaction of these macro and micro pressures.

Figure 19: Average mean scores



Data dispersion, here measured as *standard deviation* (SD), indicates that responses to most of the tensions produce an SD of less than 1.0, meaning that responses group closely around the *mean* thus suggesting high levels of accord amongst respondents. The highest SD applies to the 'System membership' tension described as 'The tension between the system's goals and priorities and the goals and priorities of my school'. While this description may have been interpreted quite generally by respondents, it is also likely that those who completed the survey were influenced in their response by their experiences with a current, centrally developed school improvement model (first introduced in September 2018). Along the same lines as the summary of the qualitative project earlier in this report, this model – and its accompanying 'improvement planning cycle' ¬– may have formed the context for the diverse responses to this tension.

Two other tensions producing an SD >1.0 are:

- under 'System membership', *The tension between competition and collaboration with neighbouring schools* (SD 1.14), and
- under 'Policy environment', *The tension brought on by policies favouring marketisation and competition* (SD 1.09).

While the links between policies favouring marketisation and competition and collaborative / competitive local school relations have already been discussed (see 'The tensions brought on by policies of choice, marketisation and competition' in the qualitative report), the high SD in quantitative responses suggest that there are widely varying experiences of these tensions amongst school leaders. More particularly, it suggests that leaders who rate this tension as one they experience 'often' or 'very often' are in schools that are competing for enrolments with one or several other neighbouring schools and, concomitantly, are subjected to the pressures of parental choice, public scrutiny of achievement data and the necessity to carefully manage the impression their school creates in the community.

As suggested earlier in this discussion, the tensions experienced by principals are many and varied. The graphs which follow (in Figure 20), depicting 'The top 4 tensions', further emphasise these diverse origins. Perhaps more tellingly, they reference and shed some light on principal perceptions of their own capacity, efficacy and resilience in the face of keenly felt pressures, ambiguities and conflicts. Taken together, they suggest thematic underpinnings for principal identity and work founded in ideas about their views of educational leadership, work / life balance, systemic recognition and the capacity to impact the performance of others. Some specific observations from the data depicted in these graphs include:

- Graph 1 depicting responses to 'the tension between being the leader of teaching and learning in my school and attending to the daily demands of my job', provides data which strongly supports claims made in the qualitative study about a desire amongst principals to be a leader of teaching and learning that is often interrupted by daily management priorities.

  > ***when things fall apart with violence and outbursts, or angry parents, or angry children. As the principal, you feel that that's your responsibility to manage, and you know the other leaders have already tried everything that they have, and then it's up to you, and ultimately you're the person that's expected to then be in touch with the regional office or the department, and follow all that through. So it takes you away from anything that could be about teaching and learning.***

- The presence of related themes about principal workload and principal health and wellbeing are evident in the graphs 1 and 2. The following observations are drawn from various crosstabulations with the data from these two categories:
  - Based on the frequency of responses in the 'often' and 'very often' choices, experience of these tensions amongst principals was highly consistent for male and female respondents and across respondents from all school types (i.e. primary, secondary, R-12 etc).
  - There was no consistent trend or pattern discernible in crosstabulation with Index of Disadvantage data, although Wendy as a principal of a low SES school sheds some light on

    > ***As a school I see us as a little village that's trying to survive with no social or personal contact from any of the people that I'm responsible to. And that it can be really difficult as a site leader because you're trying to keep everyone afloat to be professional, and to consider their wellbeing. But you just don't have a backup system. There's not a system that you feel is responsive to your day-to-day needs.***

* While the sample size for the school location described as 'remote South Australia' was small (i.e. 7 respondents), 100% of respondents in this category said that they experienced these two tensions 'often' or 'very often'

* One significant discrepancy arose in age crosstabulation, with younger principals (i.e. <40 years) indicating that these tensions are a good deal less prominent in their lives and work than older principals. This difference was greater than 20% in both categories.

- In relation to data depicted in graph 3 – *the tension between the system's measures of success and the positive achievements of my school* – this tension appears to be most keenly felt amongst principals in smaller schools (i.e. <200 students) and in school locations outside of metropolitan Adelaide. Figure 21 below depicts 'often' and 'very often' responses (combined as %) to this tension according to two variables, school size and school location:

Figure 21: 'Often' and 'very often' responses to the tension between the system's measures of success and the positive achievements of my school according to variables of school size and school location

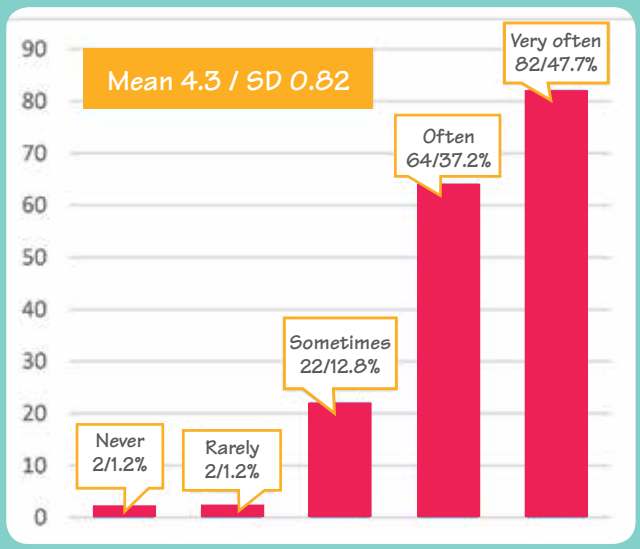
School size

	<50	51-100	101-200	201-500	501-1000	1001-1500	>1500	Total
Total schools	11	10	27	62	40	14	7	171
Often/Very Often (%)	81.9%	50.0%	81.4%	72.7%	68.3%	53.4%	62.5%	66.4%

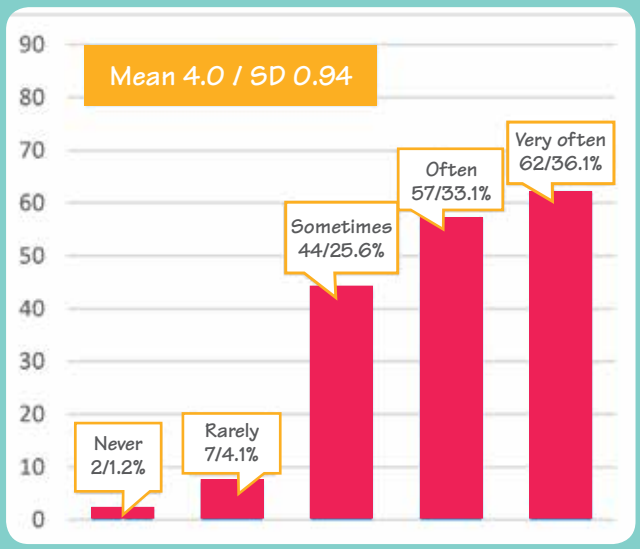
School location

	Metropolitan Adelaide	Regional centre (i.e. pop >5000)	Rural town (i.e. pop <5000)	Remote South Australia
Total schools	105	21	38	7
Often/Very Often (%)	69.3	81	81.5	71.4

- The significant variation in principal experience of the tension between the management of underperforming staff and the accountability requirements of underperformance policy (graph 4) appears to be between principal respondents in primary and secondary settings. Again, using percentages in the 'often' and 'very often' choices, the primary principal response was 51.4% while the secondary response was 77.5%.



Graph 1: The tension between being the leader of teaching and learning in my school and attending to the daily demands of my job



Graph 2: The tension arising from school complexity and workload, and related issues of mental health and wellbeing

Graph 3: The tension between the system's measures of success and the positive achievements of my school

Graph 4: The tension between the management of underperforming staff and the accountability requirements of underperformance policy

Figure 20: The top 4 tensions

Managing tension

The survey asked respondents to provide information about how they manage tensions:

i. as part of their 'local leadership' of their schools and

ii. in response to 'outside pressures' (i.e. tensions brought on by demands from outside of their schools).

While some of the management strategies specified were constructed from data gathered in the qualitative project, others were built from suggestions made by stakeholders in feedback and from the extant literature, especially from the field of organisational and management studies. The following table, Figure 22, shows a summary of principal responses to each of the strategies presented:

'Local leadership' strategies		
Mean	SD	
4.1	0.65	I seek compromise, agreement and win-win resolutions through processes such as negotiation, mediation and consensus decision-making
4.1	0.68	I build ownership among the interests / parties involved, so that they take greater responsibility for management and resolution of the tension (or conflict)
3.8	0.68	I try to be decisive – to be seen to make clear and defensible decisions
3.7	0.85	I develop and use local decision-making policies to provide a rationale and framework for managing conflict and differences of opinion
3.6	0.72	I try to synthesise the sides of the tension, ambiguity or conflict in order to propose a new and unique resolution
3.5	0.84	I use a cost/benefit approach based on the needs of the school – using the premise that it is impossible to meet the needs of all the interests / parties involved
2.3	0.81	I deliberately refrain from pursuing resolution - holding open the tension, ambiguity or conflict so that new perspectives can emerge over time
Response to 'outside pressures'		
4.0	0.60	I sort and prioritise pressures imposed from outside according to my understanding of their importance and respond to them accordingly
4.0	0.65	I manage the risk involved in order to protect myself and others from negative consequences
3.6	0.8	I mobilise my various networks and alliances to give me support and to help me deal productively with outside pressures
3.2	0.57	I embrace outside pressures as positive opportunities for growth and development
2.5	0.77	I am adversarial and resistant in the face of outside pressures, looking to push back and to advocate alternative positions

Figure 22: Principal responses to managing tension

The information in Figure 22 shows that respondents support a variety of strategies, suggesting that, in the face of local tensions and outside pressures, many principals have a broad repertoire at their disposal, ranging across procedural solutions, policy development, mitigation strategies and personal leadership influence. In light of this pattern of frequent use of a range of strategies, a 'situational' quality might reasonably be attributed to the choices made by leaders, with principals matching strategies to the tension they are experiencing by calculating the balance between possible negative effects and potential benefits to the school and themselves. Applying this rationale, an explanation for why the strategy, 'deliberately refrain(ing) from pursuing resolution' is the least frequently used of those provided, is probably found in a preference amongst principals for being seen as decisive and outcomes-oriented rather than as hesitant, indecisive or ambivalent.

Favoured leadership strategies for managing in-school tensions

The bar charts, Figures 23-25, show the three most favoured leadership strategies (according to both mean score and percentage of responses in the 'often' and 'very often' choices) for managing in-school tension.

Figure 23: I seek compromise, agreement and win-win resolutions through processes such as negotiation, mediation and consensus decision-making

Figure 24: I build ownership among the interests / parties involved, so that they take greater responsibility for management and resolution of the tension (or conflict)

The first two management strategies shown in the graphs above capture a principal preference for avoiding or ameliorating tension and conflict by working collaboratively with others and / or building the capacity of others to manage tension and conflict themselves. Reiterating an earlier observation from the qualitative study (see section 'Being influential'), these strategies can be usefully interpreted, after Foucault (2007), as a form of 'pastoral power' with the principal choosing to 'shepherd the flock' towards desired outcomes rather than using the authority of their position more explicitly and forcefully.

Figure 25: I try to be decisive – to be seen to make clear and defensible decisions

The third strategy in this group shifts the emphasis to the personal leadership style that principals might choose to adopt in the management of tension. In describing a preference for 'decisive' leadership, this strategy appears somewhat at odds with earlier references to building collaboration and ownership. Taken collectively, the three favoured strategies for managing in-school tensions shown in the graphs capture a tension of their own; the tension between the desire to work collaboratively, share responsibility, build the capacity of others etc. and a perceived need to act decisively in the face of ambiguity and conflict. One interpretation of this tension is captured in the description of a leader/follower paradox in Figure 26.

Figure 26: A leader / follower paradox

Principals are imbued with leadership identities that are individualistic, autonomous and heroic but, paradoxically, are dependent on the perceptions, 'projections and fantasies' (Sinclair, 2011, p. 510) of followers to endow this identity as leader upon them. This paradox, in operating in and on the broader milieu of principal 'identity work' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), warns against a rush to recognising the collaborative practices of principals as a form of democratic leadership. Rather, the express preference amongst principals to be seen as 'one of the team' rather than as autocratic leaders, while serving multiple purposes, is perhaps most productively understood as a form of pastoral power directed to courting and mobilising followers and to the securing of the principal's preferred identity as a strong and decisive leader. This interpretation is captured by Ball and Carter (2002) when they describe how teachers are 'subject to the charismatic gaze' of leaders who 'project a charismatic identity in order that they get results … in terms of staff commitment, motivation and empowerment' (p. 564).

adapted from Dolan, C. (2020). *Paradox and the school leader: The struggle for the soul of the principal in neoliberal times.* Singapore: Springer

Leadership strategies in response to outside pressures

Respondents were asked, *(w)hat strategies do you use as a leader to manage tensions brought on by demands from outside your school?* The following charts, Figures 27 to 29, show the strategies most favoured according to both mean score and percentage of responses in the 'often' and 'very often' choices.

Figure 27: I sort and prioritise pressures imposed from outside according to my understanding of their importance and respond to them accordingly

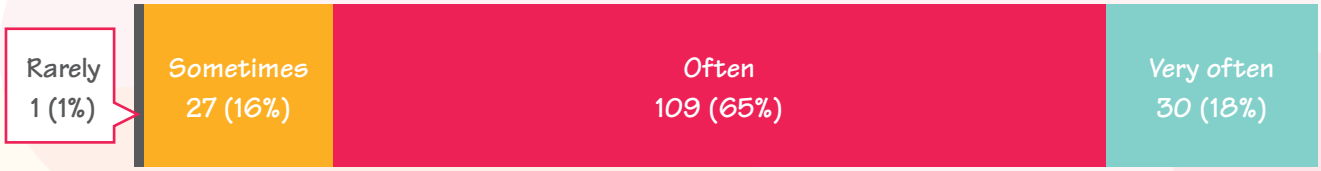


Figure 27 picks up on one of the strong themes developed from the qualitative study about the work principals do in the 'space' between policy making (including the intentions and demands of policy makers) and the enactment of centrally developed policy in schools. Local practices such as 'manoeuvre', 'finding room to move', 'filtering' and 'leveraging' mentioned in qualitative interviews seem to find equivalence, in this quantitative part of the project, in the preferred way principals deal with pressures imposed for outside of their schools. Embodied in the processes of sorting and prioritising that many undertake are important qualities associated with responding to local needs, buffering the negative effects of centralised demands and making professional judgements about what needs to be done straight away and what can be delayed or ignored.

Figure 28: I manage the risk involved in order to protect myself and others from negative consequences

This well supported management strategy also links quite directly with observations drawn from interviews in the qualitative study. It adds support to the perception held by many interviewees that initiatives, instructions and directives originating from beyond the school embody a level of risk related, for example, to increased workload, heightened accountability and potential damage to professional standing and career prospects. That 81% of respondents claim that they 'often' or 'very often' manage the risk from outside pressures by protecting themselves and others from

negative consequences suggests high levels of risk aversion amongst principals and, concomitantly, the presence of disincentives to their active participation and strong inducements to comply.

Figure 29: I mobilise my various networks and alliances to give me support and to help me deal productively with outside pressures

That over 90 per cent of respondents claim they mobilise their networks and alliances 'sometimes', 'often' or 'very often' in managing outside pressures suggests that principals are attuned to the value and importance of caucusing around issues they have in common. This data is very supportive of the individual claims made in the qualitative study about 'strength in numbers' and the importance of formal and informal alliances and, in particular, the work of principal associations such as SAPPA and SASPA. This theme is again pursued in the section 'Your political interest and engagement' later in this report.

Figure 30: I am adversarial and resistant in the face of outside pressures, looking to push back and to advocate alternative positions

Figure 30 shows a quite different response profile from those discussed above.

This data profile, in depicting the less frequent use of 'adversarial' and 'resistant' practices, provokes a range of explanatory possibilities. Working from the literature, the body of writings about managing tension (and ambiguity, contradiction and conflict) in the workplace is vast, varied and, therefore, impossible to synthesise in this space. However, one of its most consistent qualities is its provision of apolitical and managerial accounts of processes such as separation, compromise, synthesis, convergence, acceptance, accommodation and resolution. These accounts generally overlook the complexity of this work, the power relations that are in play, and an inextricable connection between the way tension is experienced and the way it is managed.

Applied to the quantitative data from this project, evidence of preferences for negotiation, mediation and consensus decision-making speak quite directly to overcoming feelings of discomfort and ambiguity brought on by the experience of conflict and disharmony. In regard to outside pressures, references to practices such as risk management and mobilising of networks and alliances suggest not only the unpalatability of disagreement between principals and their bosses, but also the unequal distribution of power and the accompanying perception of a need to mitigate the risks that existing power arrangements might pose.

A similar observation, if somewhat subliminal, might be gleaned from the aforementioned responses to practices of opposition and resistance. One interpretation of why this strategy was the least favoured by respondents is that it describes a response to 'outside pressures' that amounts to a more explicit and confrontationist challenge to existing relations of power and, as such, poses personal and professional risks that many are unwilling to take. This brief account of the links between principal experiences of tension and its management suggest, amongst other things, that the analysis of the data gathered in this part of the survey must pay attention to restoring the political dimension to both favoured and unfavoured strategies. This theme is given some prominence in the analysis which follows.

What type of policy worker are you?

Respondents were asked to choose up to four descriptors – from the following list of ten – that characterise their policy work as a school leader. **Figure 31** below shows the scores for each of the descriptors.

Maker	I develop local policies for my school that are compatible with centrally developed policy
Buffer	I look to protect (buffer) staff from outside interference imposed through centralised policy
Opportunist	I use policy as a mandate to lead others in initiatives that would otherwise be difficult to achieve
Enthusiast	I look for opportunities in policy implementation to strengthen my personal leadership influence
Critic	I look to critique centralised policy, defend oppositional positions and maintain counter-discourses
Entrepreneur	I seek possibilities in centrally developed policy for new and enterprising school-based initiatives
Filterer	I sort out which policies I need to treat seriously and which I can ignore, give low priority, partially enact
Translator	I look to make meaning for others and to tailor centrally developed policy to local needs
Interpreter	I look to interpret and decode centrally developed policy successfully into my local setting
Conduit	I try to implement centrally developed policy as exactly as possible

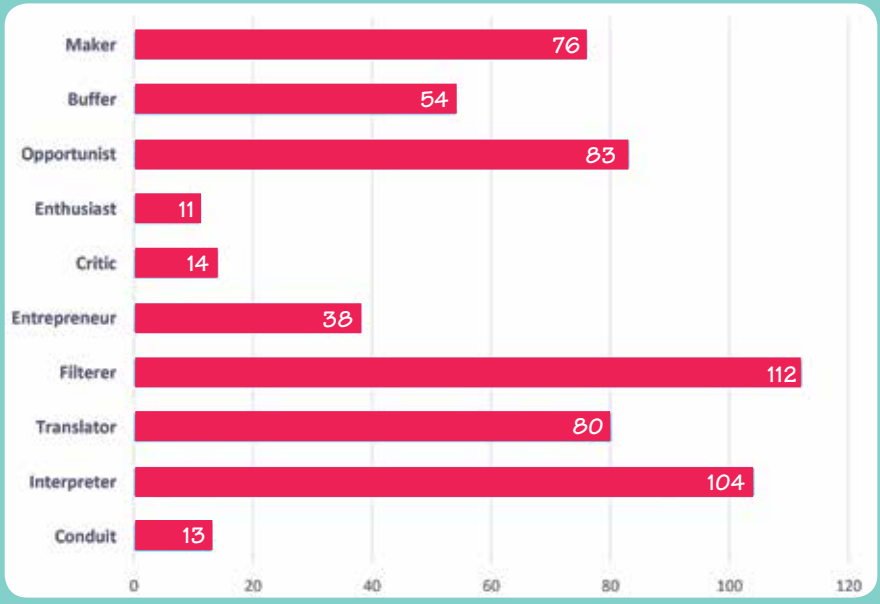


Figure 31: Scores for each of the policy work descriptors

The responses in this section of the survey align closely with earlier analysis of qualitative data about the policy work of principals and the interpretive possibilities in considering principals as 'policy subjects' and 'policy actors'. The characterisations provided expand this subject/actor pairing into a broader set of categories. Notwithstanding the restrictive and reductive tendencies of this type of categorisation (and accompanying concerns about failing to capture the full complexity and range of principal policy work) the data in this section does provide some useful insights into how principals work with, on and occasionally against policy. Perhaps most tellingly, the four categories most often chosen by respondents – Filterer, Interpreter, Opportunist and Translator – all describe the active involvement of principals in the policy 'space' between the making of policy and its implementation in schools. Furthermore, they reflect a form of 'problematisation' (Foucault) that many principals undertake as they sort, interpret and evaluate policy in terms of:

i. the problems it is designed to solve and

ii. whether it is a good match to the local version of those problems.

Taken together, these popularly chosen responses suggest a willingness of principals to resist assumptions of their compliance and their willingness to be conduits of centrally developed policy and to instead intervene in the standardised and calculative ambitions of policy (and policy makers) and to enact policies in ways that are better suited to their local context.

An interpretation of this policy work (previously depicted as the paradox of policy implementation in the qualitative analysis) supports an important extension of the meaning most often attached to 'policy'. In light of evidence collected in both the qualitative and quantitative parts of this research, the term is usefully extended beyond the centrally-developed documents, directives, advice and instructions that flow into schools, to include the problems to which policies respond and the complex processes of settlement, translation and enactment that shape what happens to them when they get to schools.

Principal political interest and engagement

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which each of the statements provided about political interest and engagement applied to them and their work. Figure 32 is a summary of responses

Mean	SD	
2.9	0.83	In my work within the broader system, I await directives and then follow those directives as closely as possible
2.9	0.84	I consider myself a loyal member of the broader system and don't feel the need to question the system's policy directions
3.2	0.81	In my work within the broader system, I wait for direction from the centre and then choose how I will react on behalf of my school (e.g. comply, question, modify, resist etc)
2.6	0.95	In my work within the broader system, I am unsure of how I should be involved in the political process
3.5	0.81	As a school leader, I am curious about the intentions of centralised policy and keen to understand the logics that underpin its development and implementation
3.4	0.84	As a school leader, I am keen to critique and shape the system's policy directions and curious to explore alternative directions
2.8	0.93	My political work within the broader system includes having input into the system's policy directions
3.6	0.88	My political work includes the shaping of public opinion about education in my school community
2.5	0.81	In-school political issues restrict my capacity to engage with the policy directions of the broader system
3.0	0.98	My political work within the broader system is curtailed by the risks involved in speaking out
2.6	0.87	In my political work as a school leader I am happy to speak out publicly, even when it may involve personal or professional risk
3.9	0.93	I rely on associations (e.g. SAPPA and SASPA) to provide political representation for me as a principal
3.5	0.98	I engage in the political process through my membership of local and/or regional networks of school leaders
3.3	1.02	I engage in the political process through my membership of my local DfE Partnership

Figure 32: Political interest and engagement - A summary of responses

Data collected in this section describes a range of perceptions principals hold of their personal levels of political interest and engagement and, by extension, infers important variables affecting current and future participation. The relatively low mean scores (average mean 3.1) and a low standard deviation across all variables suggest significant levels of ambivalence and disengagement amongst respondents when it comes to political work. Reid (2018) supports this observation in *Beyond Certainty: A process for thinking about futures for Australian education:*

> **There are many groups that want to exert influence on governments to shape education policy in ways that serve their interests. As yet educators have tended not to become engaged in the political process. At a time when international comparisons are being made and education policies are being constructed on the basis of test results, and when state and territory governments are trying to work out how best to structure and organise educational systems to meet contemporary challenges, it has never been more important for educators to engage in the public debate at the state, national and global levels. (p. 86)**

The four most popularly chosen descriptors of 'political interest and engagement' shown in the graphs in Figure 33, while largely self-explanatory in terms of their broader meaning and intent, also invoke a series of practices that might usefully be attached to the political work of principals as a way of addressing issues of principal (dis)engagement. Again, following Reid (2018):

> **rather than wait and then react, educators must become involved in shaping public opinion and policy directions. This sort of political engagement starts at the school and local community level. In my view, it is the responsibility of educational leaders not only to keep abreast of contemporary trends and debates, but to develop ways by which the school community can contribute to these on a regular and systematic basis (p. 86).**

Combining Reid's call to action with data collected in this part of the quantitative study – including the top four descriptors shown in the graphs in Figure 33 – supports contemplating and shaping of a range of practices. These practices are here summarised into three broad themes, each of which is linked to equivalent observations in the qualitative study:

(i) Community leadership and engagement:

Reid's observation about the need for leaders to engage, inform and empower their school communities coincides usefully with high levels of principal support for the descriptor (m)y political work includes the shaping of public opinion about education in my school community in the quantitative survey (i.e. a mean of 3.6 and over 60% of responses in the 'often' and 'very often' choices). Several principal participants in the qualitative survey also dwelt on the significance of building political understanding and engagement amongst the school community, noting variously that it formed an important component of their professional responsibility and standing, a strategy for overcoming community ambivalence and opposition, and a way to shape and mobilise public opinion. A specific example of mobilisation that several participants in the qualitative survey described as extremely effective involved principals engaging their governing councils to do political work on behalf of their schools. While principal practices in this area are too numerous and site-specific to elaborate in this space, they could form the basis for a set of case studies for use in principal professional development emanating from this research.

(ii)Caucusing for political purposes:

The data shows a strong endorsement of the principal associations (e.g. SAPPA and SASPA) as the political voice of principals and of local and / or regional networks as places to engage in the political process. These responses in the quantitative survey complement observations made in the qualitative study about the importance of caucusing for political purposes and the possibilities held in the 'counter-power' of 'pluralistic association' (Myers, 2008, p. 125) including its capacity to overcome the fragmented 'discontents, murmurings, indifference and disengagements' (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012, p. 150) of disaffected individuals.

Several benefits appear to flow from the various coalitions and alliances to which principals belong, including:

i. recognising the additional influence gained when principals group together around issues they have in common

ii. providing a collegial antidote to individuation and its attendant vulnerability, and

iii. generating ideas, strategies and support from the pooling of group resources.

The work of peak coalitions (e.g. SAPPA and SASPA) appears to be widely admired by principals, not only for the political voice, professional support and learning opportunities they provide, but also because of a widely held perception that they work autonomously and function separately from centrally mandated groupings. Responses to the statement *I engage in the political process through my membership of my local DfE Partnership* (Mean 3.3, SD 1.02) suggest that Partnerships, as the most prevalent of the compulsory groupings, are not widely recognised as venues of political engagement, although some variety in the perspectives of respondents is also suggested. Drawing from the qualitative data, Wendy claims that the membership of partnerships can actually mitigate against a collective voice:

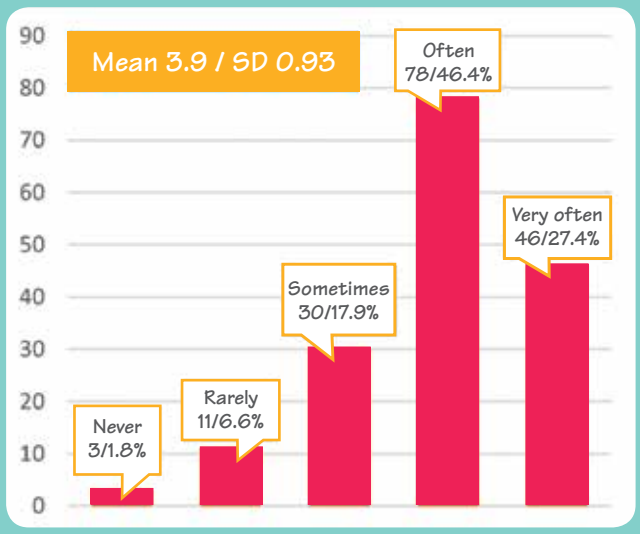
> ***The process of building a Partnership doesn't connect principals who are working in similar contexts. That's something that a principal has to do independently in their own time, and it is almost judged if you go outside of the Partnership. But the Partnership can be an isolating group if there's no other principal that has a similar cohort of learners, or cohort of staff.***

Further opportunities for shared work and for action can be found in references to local / district secondary principal alliances in this quantitative data set (as well as in the qualitative study) and to support found in membership of the Australian Education Union (AEU) and South Australian State School Leaders Association (SASSLA) – see the additional comments attached to this section in Figure 34.

(iii) Renegotiating models of consultation:

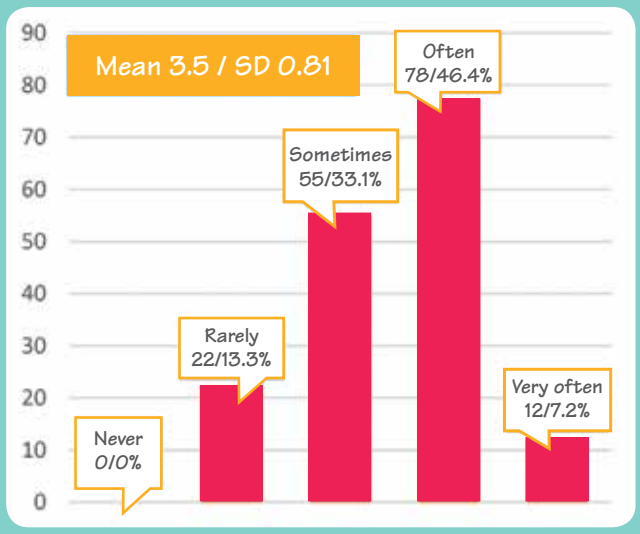
Principal respondents identified quite strongly with the statement that (a)s a school leader, I am curious about the intentions of centralised policy and keen to understand the logics that underpin its development and implementation (i.e. mean 3.6), however, they were significantly less likely to claim (m)y *political work within the broader system includes having input into the system's policy directions* as part of their own political interest and engagement (i.e. mean 2.8). These responses support a widespread view amongst participants in the qualitative project about a lack of principal involvement in consultation about policy. Observations collected suggest future work in this area should be directed to addressing the spasmodic, disingenuous and untimely qualities of current processes, to creating structures that support principal involvement and to valuing and taking account of the 'voice from the field' that principals offer.

While the observation that principals hold a range of perceptions of their personal levels of political interest and engagement was earlier shown to be is supported by the quantitative data, subsequent analysis, including references to the qualitative project, suggest that opportunities exist for garnering greater interest and mobilising principals in a more coherent political project. Pairing this observation with the importance principal respondents attach to their membership of formally constituted groups, particularly SAPPA and SASPA, suggests that this work of improving principal engagement might usefully be undertaken by such groups (see 'Recommendations' at the beginning of this report).

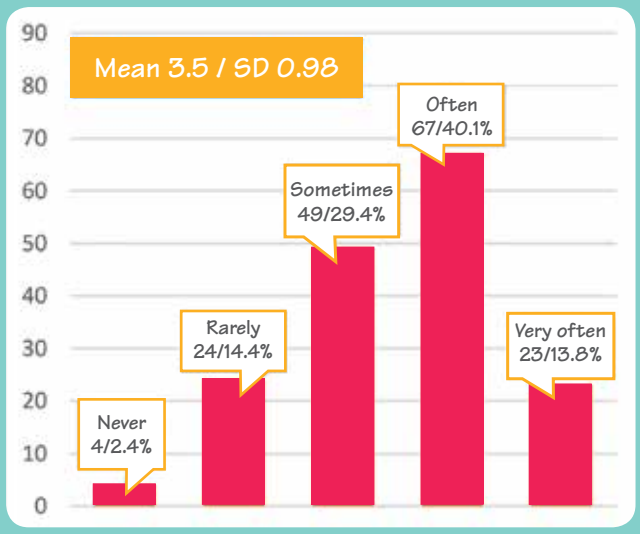


Graph 1: I rely on associations (e.g. SASPA/SAPPA) to provide political representation for me as a principal

Graph 2: My political work includes the shaping of public opinion about education in my school



Graph 3: I am curious about the intentions of centralised policy and keen to understand that underpin its development and implementation



Graph 4: I engage in the political process through my membership of local and/or regional networks of school leaders

Figure 33: Political interest and engagement – the top 4 responses

Respondents were asked to add any other descriptors that apply to their own interest and engagement in the political process

AEU is as important for leaders as teachers.

Active involvement in the AEU is important to having my voice heard particularly in relation to industrial issues such as working conditions for staff.

Don't forget SASSLA and AEU, although the latter is often less than helpful and even antagonistic.

I don't have time in my work life to spend much time thinking about these issues unless they impact on me directly.

I sometimes attempt to enact change and create policy by 'stealth', using other levers than the traditional policy crafting.

I was much more involved early career.

Involvement in decision making through partnership has decreased over past few years with different LE (local education) team.

The principals in my networks are reluctant to question or challenge. In fact, if we do, we are labelled 'combative' and this impacts future job opportunities. I have experienced this first-hand.

Voicing disagreement in my partnership will be met with retribution yet I am told to consult with my staff.

Working in the rural setting - I don't really focus on the political process. At times in my career I have been aware of ways to input but at this point I don't see many opportunities - however I don't read every message from the department so I may be ignorant. The casual 'send me an email' from the CEO seems a bit unlikely to yield a result.

The thing that restricts my involvement in the provision of opinion on Departmental policy, is that we are not systematically asked. We may be 'consulted' through SASPA with papers that are already written, but there is no systemic consultative process to capture the collective intelligence of principals.

Figure 34: Political interest and engagement: Additional comments

(iv) Linking experience and participation:

The hypothesis *'that more experienced principals respond differently to the demands of policy than less experienced principals'* finds limited support in cross-tabulation of the variables 'as a school leader I am keen to critique and shape the systems policy directions and curious to explore alternative directions' and 'how many tenures have you had as a school principal' (see Figure 35). While a clear pattern is not discernible (and the hypothesis is not therefore proven) the data does show the need for more searching questions about the changing nature of principal's responses to policy as they become more experienced. Certainly, the qualitative study provides some useful entry points, such as Jessica's claim that 'at my stage of my career I have the confidence to not worry about what might be seen as a career limiting move', Andrew's understanding that 'having been around for a while and being experienced, I know when to stand up and when to say stuff' and Marika's insight that 'knowing that I've still got a good 15 years of principalship in me in the system, I'm very mindful of career limiting comments'.

Keen to critique and shape system's policy directions / curious to explore alternative directions	How many tenures have you had as a school principal?				
	None (e.g. acting in position)	One (i.e. first tenure	Two	Three	Four or more
Often	1 (14.3)%	19 (30.2%)	18 (42.9%)	8 (27.6%)	17 (43.6%)
Very Often	0	3 (4.8%)	6	2 (6.9%)	2 (5.1%)
Total count (all responses)	6	55	40	27	38

Figure 35: Linking principal experience (by number of tenures) to participation in system's policy work

PART 6:

Conclusions

In this summing up, the language of 'conclusive findings' is avoided in favour of a focus on the actions that might reasonably proceed from the data collected and analysed in this project. Such an approach is in keeping with the positioning of the research, advocated throughout this report, as a type reflexive pragmatism marked by 'a sense of direction and a commitment to accomplishing a result' even as the 'uncertainty and indecisiveness' (Alvesson, 2010, p. 7) inherent in this type of project is acknowledged and included.

Aside from its implications for stakeholder action (depicted in 'Recommendations' at the beginning of this document), there are several other interesting themes and promising possibilities emerging from this research. These are briefly summarised as follows:

A mixed-methods approach

Methodologically, the project adds to a growing body of literature supporting the mixing of qualitative and quantitative methods and challenging the notion that these methods have formed into 'belligerent and incompatible factions' (Muijs, 2004, p. 3). As complementary parts, the qualitative project supported a deeper inquiry into contextual influences and dwelt on the nuances and differences in individual principal's working lives, while the quantitative research was useful in more broadly canvassing opinions and feelings about relevant issues. In combination, the exploratory qualities of the qualitative project provided a clear direction and strong rationale for the line of questioning pursued in the quantitative project. Subsequently, in analysis of the less personal quantitative data, this synchronicity yielded rich possibilities for an interweaving of perspectives from both parts of the project, creating a more complete data-informed response to the research problems being addressed while building a more cohesive narrative about the lives and work of principals.

The importance of tension, ambiguity and paradox

Working against the washed-out qualities of positivist, acontextual and apolitical readings of the lives and work of principals, this research makes a strong case for making tension, ambiguity and paradox a central consideration. Evidence of their pervasive presence immediately provides a strong rational for their inclusion. However, the case is made more fully in data analysis, where tension, ambiguity and paradox are shown to work constitutively on principals to shape the understanding that they, and others, have of their leadership. In this shaping work, the variety of principal experiences and ways of managing conflict and tension, function to show the heterogeneity of the broader principal cohort and to challenge assumptions of a homogenous and compliant workforce.

In consideration of interpretive possibilities, it can also be argued that the ubiquitous presence and uncomfortable management of 'tension' appears to caution principals against the premature choice of one option over another by suggesting the need to be sensitive to broader possibilities. It also brings *heteroglossia*[2] to interpretive work by suggesting that the hearing of many voices and the consideration of multiple perspectives might be preferable to the need that many principals to feel to be strong, quick and decisive in making their decisions.

At a meta-analytical level, tension, ambiguity and paradox invoke an approach to policy research that insists that problems can only be understood by bringing together in analysis the systems-level development of policy and micro-level investigation of the perceptions and experiences of those implementing policy. This research exhibits the qualities of this 'policy sociology' approach (see Ozga, 1990; Gale, 2001; Ball, 2015) by using 'tension' as an antidote to the tendency to abstract problems from their relational settings and as a tool for understanding the messiness and complexity of those relations (see Grace, 1995).

[2] e.g.'Heteroglossia' is a term coined by Bakhtin (1934/2004) to denote the presence of two or more voices.

The felt experience (of tension)

While principals interviewed in the qualitative study displayed and occasionally described a range of emotions (including exhilaration, satisfaction and pride on one side and frustration, anger, envy and insecurity on the other) this research did not fully pursue or capture an understanding of the felt experience of tension in the principal workplace. While it may be reasonable to assume the inevitability of a range of emotions being evoked, future research might usefully seek a more comprehensive account of the emotion, affect and feeling that accompany the principal's experiences and management of tension. As well as providing better links to issues raised in this project about principal anxiety, mental health and wellbeing, such research would also inform a better understanding of the way the felt experience shapes and animates leader's reactions, decisions and relationships.

The purposes of schooling

While faintly traceable in the recommendations at the beginning of this report, a consistent theme running through participant input into the qualitative study and in responses to various of the tensions described in the quantitative study, is about the purposes of schooling. Many participants provide locally formed views of these purposes and express concern at contemporary policy developments and directions that seem to have a narrowing effect. Three examples are provided here from a much larger pool. The first is from Wendy, a primary school principal in a low SES school:

> ***(Central office personnel) don't value that we teach kids how to interact with each other, how to be respectful, how to follow school values, how to be able to manage themselves in the community, how to skill themselves to survive because their parents don't feed them and look after them and clothe them.***

Isabella makes a concerted claim for the development of skills beyond the requirement gain improvement in literacy and numeracy:

> ***The purpose of schooling is to help children understand how to socialise with people who are different to them. To accept and celebrate people who are different to them. To understand how to include someone, or how to even notice when someone may be feeling excluded … to be caring and compassionate, respectful and responsible and honest and trustworthy. You can't narrow a school's achievements or improvement agenda down to just literacy and numeracy based on NAPLAN.***

Erica broadens the discussion while, at the same time, critiquing a tendency to narrow the purposes of schooling:

> ***We want to build kids with social capital, that are going to be citizens, understand citizenship, and their part in it. We want them to be lifelong learners, because that's what they're going to need to be able to do to thrive. It's way broader than how well you can read and write - how to access learning, how to access information, how to be critical in analysis, and all of those things.***

In light of these types of sentiments, the theme of 'purposes' assumes an importance that both informs and transcends many of the tensions outlined in this report. Biesta (2015) claims that 'if we do not know what it is we are seeking to achieve with our educational arrangements and endeavours, we cannot make any decisions about the content that is most appropriate and the kind of relationships that are most conducive (p. 77).

In the context of this research, Biesta's comments support joining a discussion of purposes to principal perceptions of the work they want to do (and the roles they want to play) as leaders of teaching and learning. They invite a more substantial discussion about the 'why?', 'how?' and 'what?' of principal leadership and guard against vague and abstract ideas about 'instructional', 'pedagogic', and 'educational' leaders and the performative responses they invoke.

Biesta's observations also hint at the importance of bringing local inflection to the broadly conceived directives of policy. They seem to advocate deep consideration of how to meet the needs of individual students by engaging

with variables that invite in-school advocacy and decision making. Close consideration of purposes also presents the possibility of accommodating widely held responses to the broader question, 'what is education for?' and to locating commonly held assertions about 'learning', 'achievement' and 'excellence' inside of a more generously framed declaration about respect, compassion, citizenship, community participation and social capital.

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SASPA SOUTH AUSTRALIAN SECONDARY PRINCIPALS' ASSOC.

SAPPA South Australian Primary Principals Association Inc

University of South Australia