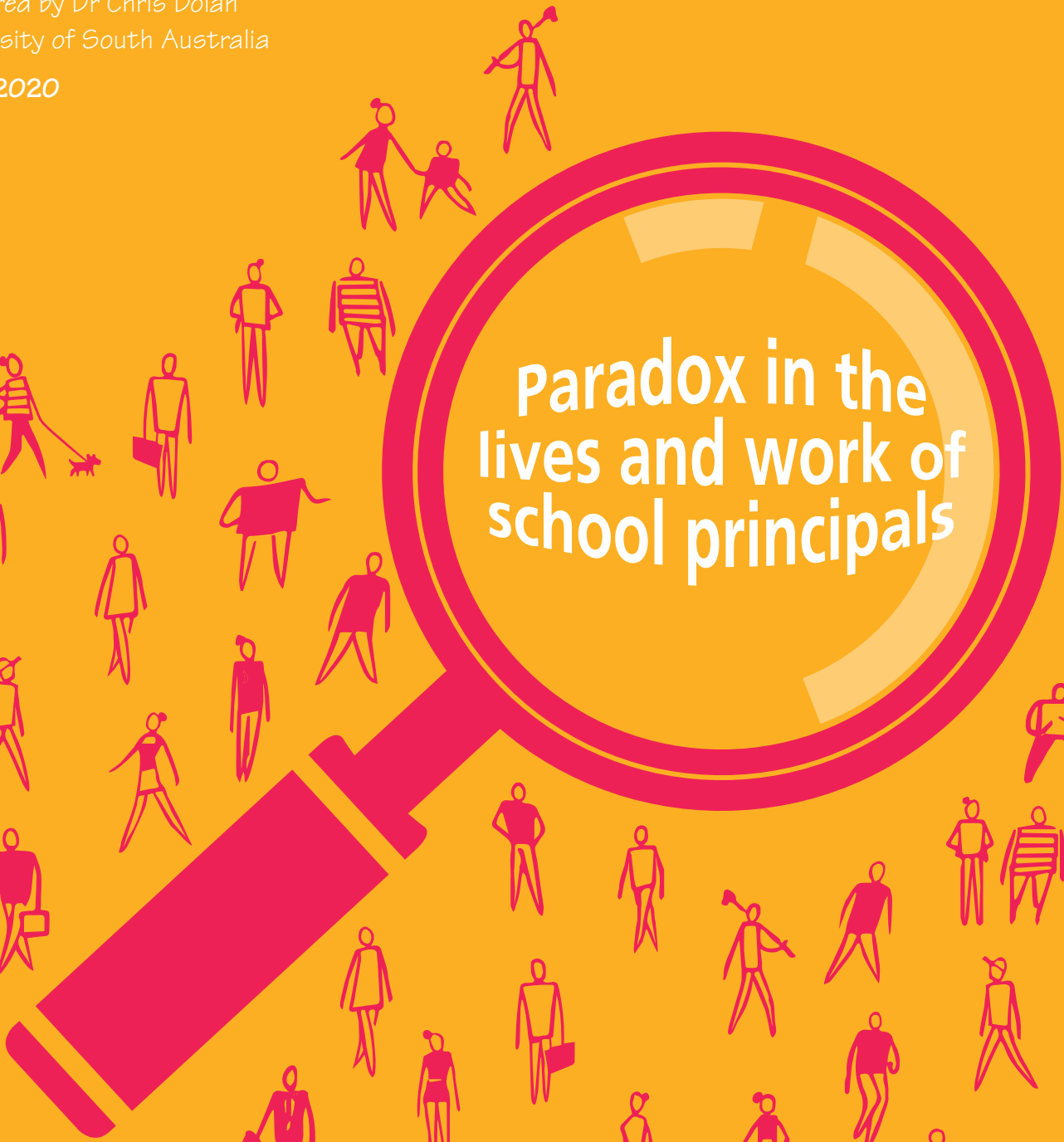


Executive Summary

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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).



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.

Peter Mader

**President
SASPA**

Angela Falkenberg

**President
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Robert Hattam

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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



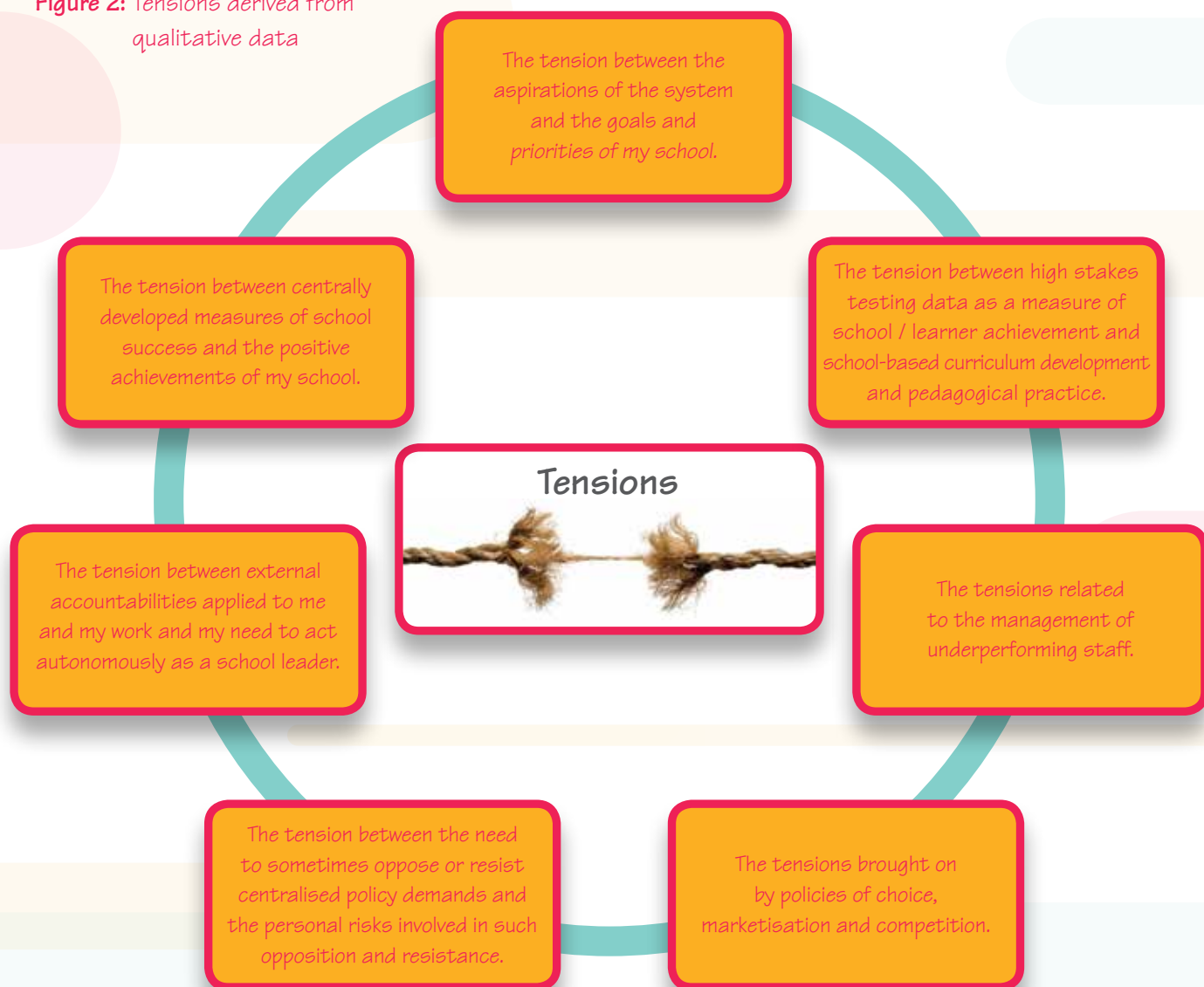


Tensions

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.



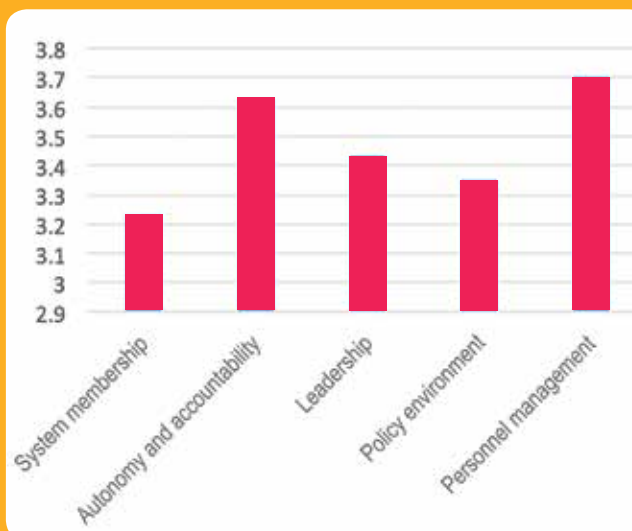
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Amongst the twenty tensions described in the survey, the following are the four tensions with the highest mean scores:

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



Manoeuvre
Tweak
Push the guff aside
Negotiate
Filter
Push back
Ignore
Leverage
Find room to move
(Re)frame
Contextualise
Adapt
Massage
Dance a little
Manipulate



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).

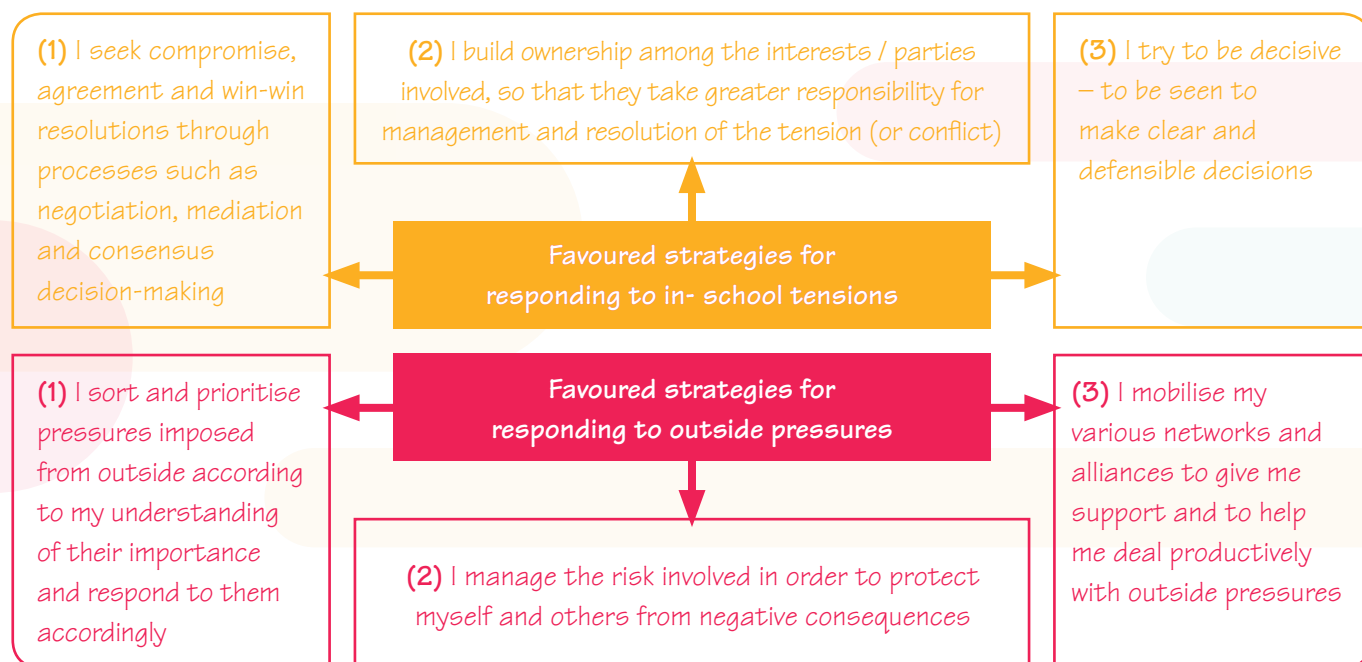


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Figure 5 shows the most favoured leadership strategies for both categories (based on mean score and percentage of responses in the 'often' and 'very often' choices).

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.

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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.





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

Recommendations



- 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.





SOUTH AUSTRALIAN
SECONDARY PRINCIPALS' ASSOC.

