# Illuminating Principal Practice

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**March, 2024**

**University of South Australia** | **Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion**

# Illuminating principal practice

Research report

Report to the South Australian Primary Principals Association (SAPPA), South Australian Secondary Principals Association (SASPA) and South Australian Area School Leaders Association (SAASLA)

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# Foreword

School principals are critical to the delivery of great educational outcomes that positively shape the lives of children and young people. The direction and impact of the teaching profession depends on the design of the principal's role, how principals are supported in their roles, and how principals are able to use their time in service of different priorities.

Public school principals occupy a position between staff working in schools and staff working in the offices of the South Australian Government's Department for Education. Principals are also witness to the impact of broader social, economic, cultural, and technological dynamics that shape the lives of our young people within and beyond school. Principals work in an environment beset by many competing challenges and they constantly adapt and apply their professional knowledge to deal with uncertainty, risk, and paradox on a daily basis. The role of the principal involves:

- daily engagement with children and young people in the school setting;

- regular interaction with parents, carers, and community-based organisations; and

- interaction with the Department for Education, other government agencies and corporations.

This unique position affords principals a broad view on how social change and education policy and governance shape practice, culture, and behaviour in schools. The findings of the *Illuminating Principal Practice* research project provide important insights into the changing role of the school principal, and thus shine a light on how schools are impacted by, and can respond to, their changing social and political contexts. Understanding this change is critical for pursuing sustained improvement.

To generate this evidence base, the South Australian Primary Principals' Association (SAPPA), South Australian Secondary Principals' Association (SASPA) and South Australian Area Schools Leaders Association (SAASLA) commissioned the University of South Australia to conduct research into the complex and changing nature of principals' work.

The research reported here is grounded in strong engagement with principals and leaders in primary, secondary and area schools and should be viewed as an authentic account of the experience of serving as a principal in South Australian schools. Notably, changing work demands, decreasing job satisfaction, principal wellbeing and professional autonomy continue to be highlighted as concerns for the profession.

This report challenges us to take stock of these findings and engage in productive conversations with key stakeholders to re-imagine the role of the principal and the structures that support principals to enhance job satisfaction and establish sustainable and professionally rewarding models of educational leadership.

The *Illuminating Principal Practice* report signals "what could be" for the profession, helping us to envisage more participatory and professional approaches to conceiving and enacting public education policy through reconceptualising the role of the school principal. Confronted by growing workforce and technological challenges, in an increasingly complex world, this task is as urgent as ever.

As partners in this research, we commend this report to you and hope it will support new conversations about educational leadership in South Australia.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
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| | | | **Dean of Research: UniSA Education Futures / Professor of Education Policy** |
| **President SAPPA** | **Chief Executive SASPA** | **President SAASLA** | |

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# Acronyms and abbreviations

CE              Chief Executive, Department for Education

DfE             Department for Education

ED              Education Director

IED             Index of Educational Disadvantage

IPP             Illuminating Principal Practice

NAPLAN          National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy

OECD            Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PDP             Performance and Development Plan

SAASLA          South Australian Area School Leaders Association

SACE            South Australian Certificate of Education

SAPPA           South Australian Primary Principals Association

SASPA           South Australian Secondary Principals Association

SES             Socio-economic status

TALIS           Teaching and Learning International Survey

Interviewees have each been assigned a number (i.e., 1 to 50). Excerpts from interviews used in this report are cited as i1, i2 … i50.

# Executive summary

## Overview of the project

'Practice matters' is the simple maxim that underpins much of what follows in this report on the research project, *Illuminating Principal Practice* (IPP). Generated for SAPPA, SASPA and SAASLA, the report is a formal response to the two key purposes of the IPP research agreed in planning:

1. to access perspectives from the field which shed light on the extent and complexity of current practices and, thus, support a more expansive and complete rendition of the current role; and

2. to direct the analysis of data about principal practices towards reconceptualising the lives and work of principals in ways that illuminate how current constraints might be loosened and transformational leadership practices might flourish.

IPP used a mixed-methods approach to data collection identified as an *exploratory sequential* design. Qualitative and quantitative components were ordered and configured in ways that gave the qualitative data analysis (based on data gathered in interviews with 50 state school principals) the lead in identifying key themes and sub-themes, with quantitative data from a survey distributed to all members of SAPPA, SASPA and SAASLA used in support.

Decisions about methodology proceeded in step with theoretical scaffolding that sought to use the Practice Architecture Theory in both the analysis of principal practice and understanding of the constitutive effects of practice in the lives and work of principals. Utilising conceptual resources provided by Practice Architecture Theory allowed for a richer understanding of the conditions of practice, encompassing areas such as ways of leading, job satisfaction, autonomy and wellbeing. The data illuminated the intricate interplay between principals' sayings, doings and relational practices, providing a more comprehensive picture of the challenges and complexities principals face.

Expanding the practice matters maxim, this combination of methodology and theory brought observations about the heterogeneity and complexity of current practice into direct contact with ideas about possible change and reform. As such, it opened new spaces for thinking about how the principal role might be reconceptualised in the future.

Capitalising on the methodology/theory mix in data analysis also saw the development of a framework for apprehending, joining and thematising data collected in the components of IPP. The three key concepts framing the project are here used as organisers in a summary of key findings and recommendations. *Key findings* are grouped under the descriptive headings related to: (i) current practices and conditions of practice, and (ii) the umbrella of job satisfaction. *Recommendations* are more exploratory and make future-oriented observations about how the role of the principal might be reconceptualised.

## Key findings

*Current principal practices and conditions of practice: Constraints and enablers*

1. For principals, ways of leading are deeply influenced by contextual variables, including school size, location and locality, level of disadvantage, extent of principal experience and time spent in the role at the current school.

2. Amongst different ways of leading, fostering a positive, participative and successful school culture is of central importance. 'Cultural leadership' serves as a descriptor for capturing those practices principals believe contribute to the wellbeing and success of their schools.

3. Instructional leadership (or leading teaching and learning) is variously expressed in principal practice, with a willingness to lead pedagogy, curriculum and teacher professional learning, mitigated by uncertainties amongst some principals about their capacity to direct their leadership toward improving teaching and learning outcomes.

4. Distributive leadership models, in practice, continue to be guided by in-school decisions about the allocation of responsibility and are generally directed to issues of more equitable management of the workloads of designated leaders.

5. Principals maintain a strong interest in social justice leadership, in particular, the shifting of theory to practice in ways that commit them to ongoing reflection and action, influence the practices of others and meet the needs of all students.

*The broad umbrella of job satisfaction*

6. Principals are experiencing an intensification of administrative work. Administrative tasks associated with, for example, human resource and personnel management (exacerbated by current teacher shortages), financial and facilities management, accountability processes, data collection, and critical incident reporting, are widely considered unnecessarily time-consuming, burdensome and as negatively impacting job satisfaction.

7. Principals express feelings of drudgery and a perceived shift in their status from educators to administrators, with the increase in administrative workload linked to reduced time available for essential tasks related to interactions with teachers, students and the broader school community.

8. Changes in complexity and diversity of the student cohort is a major source of work intensification and a key influence on principal job satisfaction. Principals highlight the challenges of adapting to diverse student needs, with workload implications in leading pedagogical change, managing student behaviour, accessing special needs expertise, managing external providers, developing appropriate facilities and facilitating productive parent interactions.

9. Principals acknowledge the need for accountability, but present varying perspectives on the practical implications of external accountability tools and processes. These perspectives include questions about the effectiveness of current accountabilities and their capacity to impact school outcomes.

10. Principals identify multiple sources of stress, anxiety and vulnerability and link these to issues of personal and professional wellbeing and sustainability.

11. In a marketised school environment, principals are increasingly concerned about reputational risks, unfavourable conditions of school choice and competition and the negative impacts of data-led comparisons.

12. Principals describe a significant challenge in navigating outside policy demands and claim these demands often impede their ability to address the unique needs of their local communities.

13. Educational Directors (EDs), as immediate line managers, have a key influence on principal job satisfaction. The ED/principal relationship is linked to principal policy compliance, career risks, local agency and autonomy, and feelings of worth, support and professionalism.

14. Principals express strong commitment to enacting the requirements of their position, find numerous positive aspects to their job and often gain satisfaction from local complexities, responding to diverse needs and gaining positive recognition from others.

These findings map some of the terrain over which the 'sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings' of principal practice are dispersed, while continually acknowledging the presence of inside and outside constraints and enablers of practice and the boundary conditions that demarcate and contain the principal role.

# Recommendations

*How can the role of the principal be reconceptualised?*

The question of how the principal role might be reconceptualised in the future, as the third key concept framing IPP, appears in the body of this report as a less constrained and more imaginative set of ideas. In this executive summary, it marks out the project's recommendations.

**Recommendation 1**

**Rationalise the administrative responsibilities and reduce the administrative workload of principals.**
In practice:
- Centralise administrative tasks.
- Reduce the administrative workload of principals by reducing the accountability, reporting and compliance expectations of DfE central office.
- Create more user-friendly centralised timelines, systems and technologies.
- Build in-school models of distributed leadership that include dispersing administrative responsibilities.
- Change existing in-school roles to include administrative tasks and responsibilities currently held by principals (including expanding the Business Manager role).

**Recommendation 2**

**Implement new leadership models and structures**
- Recognise the cultural leadership of the principal – that fostering a positive, participative and successful school culture is centrally important in the success of a school and its principal.
- Develop models of instructional and transformational leadership appropriate to the principal role and founded on successful current practice and the local needs of schools.
- Develop the notion of 'leader praxis' to inform theory into practice leadership, principal reflexivity and enacting of the purposes of schooling in more socially just and equitable ways.
- Devise and trial rial new models of principal deployment (e.g., role-sharing and executive principal models).

**Recommendation 3**

**Address issues of principal workload, stress and wellbeing.**
In practice:
- Reduce outside policy demands in favour of a stronger principal focus on local needs.
- Direct the work of the system, associations, and principal alliances to mitigating risks inherent in school promotion, parental choice, and marketisation and competition.
- Reduce the workload, stressors and risks associated with external accountability processes.
- Develop a comprehensive understanding of wellbeing strategies for principals and incorporate wellbeing explicitly in the role statement for the principal position.

**Recommendation 4**

**Modify current approaches to school/principal accountability**

In practice:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of current external accountability processes (e.g., in terms of workload, return-for-effort, links to school improvement).
- Develop, share and implement local accountability processes based on agreed local improvement priorities.
- Define notions of intrinsic motivation, professional accountability and internal accountability, and explore and evaluate their practical value.
- Critically evaluate the effectiveness of processes of line management, performance appraisal and merit selection in the current ED/Principal relationship.

**Recommendation 5**

**Work to increase levels of principal job satisfaction.**

In practice:

- Apply reimagined versions of principal autonomy to processes of accountability, school improvement, policy work and leadership of local initiatives.
- Develop the ED/Principal relationship by foregrounding ED provision of confidential wellbeing support, timely advice, system knowledge and professional regard.
- Address and mitigate the negative impact of career risks on principals.
- Critically appraise processes of selection, principal appointment/reappointment and extension of tenure with a view to formulating alternatives based on principles of merit, transparency, fairness and harm minimisation.

**Recommendation 6**

**Give principals a stronger and more prominent voice.**

In practice:

- Remove structures, processes and relationships founded the need for principal conformity and compliance.
- Position the principal as 'policy activator' by fostering stronger and more authentic principal participation in policy work within and beyond the school.
- Provide opportunities for principals to be influential at system level.
- Encourage and promote principal involvement in associations, networks and alliances.

# 1. Introduction

The research project, *Illuminating Principal Practice* (IPP), was conducted by the University of South Australia, from March 2023 to January 2024. Working with project partners, SAPPA, SASPA and SAASLA, this inquiry into the practices of public-school principals in South Australia proceeded from the identification of two broad purposes. Firstly, to access perspectives from the field which shed light on the extent and complexity of current practices and, thus, support a more expansive and complete rendition of the current role and, secondly, to direct the analysis of data about principal practices towards reconceptualising the lives and work of principals in ways that illuminate how current constraints might be loosened and transformational leadership practices might flourish.

*Illuminating Principal Practice* sought to address two key research questions:

- What do the practices of principals reveal about the current conditions for leadership in South Australian public schools?

- How do principal practices inform a reconceptualisation of the principal role?

The university worked with project partners to design and implement a mixed-methods study involving interview (qualitative) and survey (quantitative) components (see 'Methodology', Section 3).

## Influential (previous) research

The report from a 2019-20 research project called *Paradox in the Lives and Work of School Principals* (Dolan, 2020a), about the complex tensions in which principals are enmeshed, provided a stepping off point for IPP. By gathering data about the leadership actions and interactions of principals in their own contexts and in response to their personal perceptions of key challenges, IPP works away from the predicaments identified in the 2019-20 project and towards a more agential and productive account of principals' work. The more imaginative purpose of *Illuminating Principal Practice* – the reconceptualisation of the principal role – is foreshadowed in the foreword to the 2019-20 research report:

> *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 reconceptualised. (p. 2)

The intentions of IPP connect quite directly to recommendations made in the 2019-20 project report, including recommendations to:

- deepen understandings of the current role of principals in schools and support discussion on how this role might change in the future;
- acknowledge the increased demands being made of principals and to seek redress through improved resourcing, recognition and influence; and
- support increased autonomy for principals with attendant improvement in resourcing and workload.

*The Australian Principal Occupational, Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey*, jointly conducted by researchers at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) and Deakin University, is an independent longitudinal study of health and wellbeing of Australian school principals, deputies, assistants and vice

principals. In responding to concerns about principal wellbeing, the survey, conducted annually since 2011 and attracting participation from about 50% of Australian principals, is supportive of lines of inquiry in IPP about principal stress, anxiety and vulnerability, and to attendant interests in risk, health and job satisfaction.

*The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS)* conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) asks teachers and school principals to complete questionnaires about topics such as teaching and learning, wellbeing, professionalism, job satisfaction and various other school leadership, management and workplace issues. In inviting respondents to describe their work situation, school experiences and working conditions as accurately as possible, TALIS provided a key reference point for the framing and design of the survey used in the quantitative component of IPP, with three TALIS (2018) questions on the topic of 'Job Satisfaction' included in the IPP survey.

## A focus on practice

While much of school leadership literature is concerned with positivist[1] 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 knowledge that arises from the practices of those in designated leadership positions – knowledge that 'comes from what people do, and how they live' (Kemmis & Edwards-Groves, 2018, p. 116). In this apparent gap, IPP enquires into the diverse ways in which educational leadership is enacted at principal-practitioner level.

The research design and rationale for *Illuminating Principal Practice* have been informed by Kemmis et al.'s (2014) theory of Practice Architectures. This form of social theory emphasises that practices are not developed in a vacuum, but rather are shaped through an interplay of cultural, material and social conditions that make certain practices possible, or indeed, impossible. As a framework for the project, this comprehensive theory has been a useful analytical tool for exploring both principals' current practices (individually and collectively) and the necessary conditions for enabling transformations of principals' practices to occur. Appendix A provides a more detailed account of the Practice Architecture Theory and its influence on IPP research.

In accordance with this focus, IPP looks to recognise: (i) the explanatory importance of principal practices, including insights into how the practices – principals' 'sayings', doings' and 'relatings'– connect with current constructs of school leadership, and (ii) the conditions of practice or 'practice architectures', described by Wilkinson (2020) as 'the particular arrangements that make certain practices more or less possible' and 'which in turn create the kinds of enabling/constraining conditions for educational transformation to occur' (p. 3).

The axial function of principal 'practices' suggested, is a significant departure from many other inquiries into principals and school leadership. For example, the project:

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[1] The positivist paradigm advocates for a research approach grounded in empirical observation and verifiable data, aiming to uncover objective truths and patterns through systematic, scientific methods. Critics of positivism claim that it often oversimplifies complex phenomena and disregards subjective experience and social contexts, leading to limited understanding and conclusions.

- works against consideration of leadership as a reified arrangement of roles and structures, or a typology of preferred styles, competencies and attributes, or as a set of managerial techniques and strategies;

- takes the conditions of leadership as practice (i) as providing insights into how leadership actually gets done, (ii) as allowing questions of effectiveness and influence to 'be separated from leadership itself' (Spillane, 2012, pp. 3-4), and (iii) as opening the principal role to interrogation and change in ways that are potentially enabling, educationally beneficial and fitted to context;

- tethers principal practice to recognition of the value of the work done and, relatedly, to note the impositions of 'required work' and the need to reveal a body of principal practice that is at risk of being overlooked and under-appreciated (see, for example, Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020);

- asks after practices of 'leading praxis' (see Wilkinson, 2021) undertaken by principals which (i) work to turn theory into practice via the conscious commitment of principals to certain productive and defensible 'leadership pedagogies' (see Wilkinson, 2011), (ii) appear to transcend personal principal interests in order to take account of the interests of students, community and broader society (see, for example, Daniel & Lei 2020); and (iii) engage principals in 'the political nature of the way they … and their institutions are positioned' (McDonald, 2023, p. 2); and

- tests the utility of leading praxis by comparing theoretical categories of principal leadership, for example, as instructional leaders, transformational leaders or community leaders against the actual practices they undertake in these categories (see, for example, Reitzug, West, & Angel, 2008; Neumerski, 2013).

## The importance of context

The proposal from which this joint research project originated made the following claim:

> The proposed research will illuminate the practices of principals in context. Beyond acknowledging the importance of context, efforts to capture the lived experiences of principals will be closely linked to the many and various contexts in which principals operate. Data analysis will be directed to better understanding contextual conditions and the ways they facilitate and/or obstruct effective leadership, including encouraging principals to consider the relevance of such analysis to their own needs.

The assertion that *context* is a persuasive theme in illuminating the practices of principals relies on what Clarke and O'Donoghue (2021), describe as 'the simple but profound premise … that leadership can only be understood in the context in which it is exercised' and that leaders in different contexts 'shape their leadership accordingly' (p. 68). Mapping these ideas to the ambitions of this report requires, in the first instance, diligent attention to the wide and telling differences between schools and principals in the South Australian public education system and to the factors affecting these differences (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 not only identifies a range of contextual factors impacting principal practice, but also offers explanatory possibilities in suggesting that differences between leaders originate and manifest in the gridded connection between contextual variables. Such connections, in line with the claims of Clarke

and O'Donoghue (2021) exert a multiplicity of constitutive influences that shape principals and their practice in particular ways.
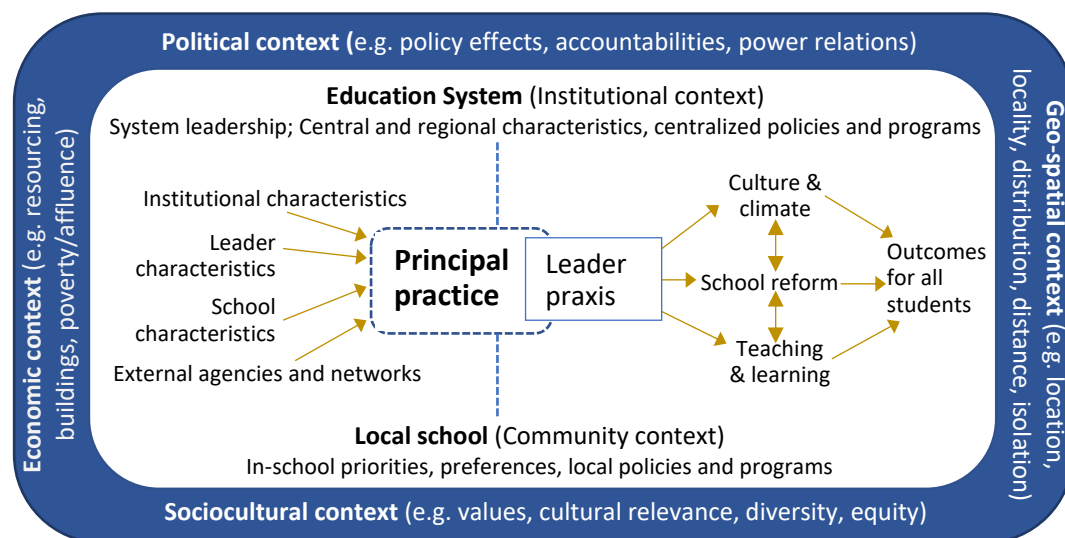


*Figure 1: Principal practice in context*

The inclusion in this study of interviewees from Area schools and small rural town primary schools and of survey respondents from area Schools (12.7% of respondents), from rural and remote school locations (29.4%) and from schools with less than 200 enrolments (31%) meant that a sizeable dataset relating to the small school context was accumulated. The summary of these data in Appendix B provides a useful case study of the importance of context in principal practice.

Not easily seen in the instrumentalised componentry of Figure 1 are more dynamic and contingent qualities, founded in the interplay of contextual influences. Some examples of these qualities include:

- the differently felt effects of the macro-contextual factors. The *economic context* of schools, for example, brings the contrasting influences of poverty and affluence to principal practice, while location and locality, in the *geo-spatial context*, create unique issues and risks associated with remoteness and isolation.

- relations between in the *institutionalised context* of the school system and the *community context* of the local school brings a range of tensions to principal practice related to local loyalties, external accountabilities and hierarchical power relationships.

- in pairing *principal practice* and *leader praxis* a suggestion that the various translations of theory into practice that principals make, (i) create the possibilities for types of agency that are responsive to local needs, and (ii) orientate cultural, transformational and instructional leadership models to mobilising ideas about equity, social justice and moral purpose.

Methodologically, making context a central concern, works to hold open the complexity in principal accounts of their practice and warns against narrowed and generalised findings in data analysis and concomitant claims to broad applicability and transferability. As the *methodology* section that follows shows, this commitment to a complex and nuanced account of principal practice is seen in the deliberate choice of qualitative analysis – with its inductive and exploratory possibilities – as the driver of IPP, with more reductive quantitative work used in support.

## 2. Methodology

The choice of a mixed methods design for *Illuminating Principal Practice* was to create more comprehensive insights into our research questions, gain broad participation across the principal cohort and enhance the validity of our results. Figure 2 shows some of the advantages anticipated in the choice of a mixed methods, while Figure 3 depicts the 'exploratory sequential'[2] design of the research and the way qualitative and quantitative components were ordered and configured in our 'qualitatively-driven' (Morse, 2017) version of a mixed methods approach.

As Figure 3 suggests:

- The qualitative component, as the major 'theoretical drive' in our project, was necessarily *inductive* – involving an exploratory disposition and 'thinking up from the data' in ways that allow key themes and concepts to emerge and that inform new theoretical possibilities (see Morse, 2017, p. 5).
- The quantitative component of our research used numerical survey data to test *deductively* the themes, concepts and theories induced in qualitative analysis – a 'thinking down' from the broader framework of qualitative analysis to formulate and test research hypotheses (Morse, 2017, p. 29) and to further inform observations made from qualitative data.

**Sequential Design Flexibility**
Data collected and analysed in sequential phases, allows informing / refining based on initial findings.

**Practical Applicability**
Yields results that are:
(i) statistically significant, and
(ii) offer rich insights applicable in real-world contexts.

**Comprehensive understanding**
Combining qualitative and quantitative data provides a more complete understanding of the research problem.

**MIXED METHODS**

**Exploration / Confirmation**
Qualitative data can inform development of quantitative measures … Subsequently, quantitative data can confirm or refute these insights.

**Methodological Innovation**
Researchers can develop innovative and creative approaches to research design and data collection / analysis.

**More valid findings**
Combining methods strengthens validity and addresses inherent weaknesses in stand-alone quantitative and qualitative methods.

*Figure 2: Advantages of mixed methods research*

| Phase | Procedure | Product |
|---|---|---|
| | | |

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[2] The exploratory sequential mixed methods design is characterized by an initial qualitative phase of data collection and analysis, followed by a phase of quantitative data collection and analysis, with a final phase of integration or linking of data from the two separate strands of data (see Berman, 2017; Cresswell & Clark, 2011).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Qualitative Data Collection | • Development of interview protocol and interview questions based on supportive theory and research objectives<br>• Individual and paired interviews with 50 participants (the 'interviewees')<br>• Semi-structured approach with indicative questions provided prior to interview (see Appendix C) | • Interview recording and transcription<br>• Textual data<br>• Compilation of a 'reading log' of initial observations and tabulations |
| Qualitative data analysis | • Phase 1 reading and coding of transcripts – within-case and cross-case identification of emerging themes<br>• Phase 2 cross-thematic data rationalisation, organisation and analysis<br>• Distillation of promising concepts/theory | • Data representation according to emerging themes<br>• Documentation of cross-theme connections/ ecologies of practice |
| Connecting qualitative and quantitative phases | • Development of survey to be administered to a broader principal cohort (the 'respondents')<br>• Survey design using supportive theory and content based on themes identified in Phase 1 qualitative analysis | • Survey tool in Qualtrics reflecting qualitative themes and drawing questions from TALIS (2018) |
| Quantitative data collection | • Completed surveys collected (n=197)<br>• Hypotheses tested and initial verifications made (i.e., supported/not supported) | • graphs/tables of responses including cross-correlated data from questions related to hypotheses |
| Quantitative data analysis | • Statistical analyses of variables in survey data (descriptive)<br>• Summary analyses of characteristics, preferences and trends<br>• Distillation of promising concepts/theory | • Report of observations from quantitative data analysis<br>• Annotated report – annotations directed to integration processes |
| Integration of qualitative and quantitative results | • interpretation-level integration of data and observations – narrative weaving of qualitative and quantitative findings<br>• finalised testing/verification of hypotheses<br>• adoption of a joint-display model of reporting | • sample interview quotes compared and contrasted to survey data analyses<br>• Integrated report – qualitative findings backed by quantitative findings |

*Figure 3: Mixed methods research - exploratory sequential design and procedures*

## Qualitative study (interviews)

### The interviewees

A total of 50 principals were interviewed in the qualitative component of *Illuminating Principal Practice*. In accordance with ethics approval, an initial group of interviewees was selected at random from comprehensive lists of available participants provided by SAPPA, SAASLA and SASPA. After establishing willingness to participate amongst this initial sample, the participant group was finalised by purposive based sampling using criteria related to school location and type and level of disadvantage, and to principal experience and gender. In short, the selection of interviewees sought significant variation in circumstances, context and leadership experience on the premise that such a group would bring a range of perspectives to the data set. The final sample consisted of 33 female and 17 male participants. In terms of levels of schooling, the participant group consisted of 19 primary, 16 secondary, 11 area and four R-12 principals. Levels of experience ranged from principals in the first tenure to those with 20 or more years in the position. Principals from sites across all categories of disadvantage were represented in the final list of interviewees. Of the 50 interviews, 44 were conducted face-to-face and six online using the Microsoft Teams platform.

### Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were used to collect responses, with only two principals opting for the paired interview option provided. Participants were sent an indicative set of interview questions prior to their scheduled interview (see Appendix C). Interviews were typically 50-60 minutes long, with audio recordings subsequently transcribed by the research team. This data collection process produced over 700 pages and approximately 350,000 words of transcription.

First-level analysis of data involved the researchers in (i) conducting a full reading of transcripts, (ii) organising the primary data into a consistent and usable form, (iii) deploying a system of 'open coding' to decontextualise units of text into segments, and (iv) grouping together similar events or common themes. The results of this first-level analyses were used to inform the survey questions used in the quantitative part of the study (see below) and to formulate a series of hypotheses to which quantitative data analysis could be directed. Second-level analysis of interview data was subsequently used to thematise the data into more discrete and manageable parts and to establish connections between the various themes identified. Following Joffe (2011), this process was directed to highlighting 'the most salient constellations of meanings present in the data set' (p. 209).

### Metaphors

Each principal participating in the qualitative study received the same set of sample questions (see Appendix C) by email in advance of the scheduled interview. Most interviewees accepted the invitation to think about an artefact or metaphor representing their leadership in their responses to the first interview question: *What does your chosen artefact (or metaphor) 'say' about your leadership?*

Metaphors are, Alvesson (2011) contends, 'important organising devices in thinking and talking about complex phenomena' (p. 2) and can be used for 'communicating insights to others' (p. 5) as a way of facilitating understanding. In interview, principal participants used metaphor to capture the ways in

which they perceive their leading practice, yielding interesting and at times compelling insights into their experiences and how they relate to reality. Excerpts from a number of the metaphors provided in interview are included in this report. Following lines of argument in Heffernan, Netolicky and Mockler (2019), they are used to move from what we know towards what we want to understand, to open up new perspectives and possibilities and to categorise, explain and interrogate the complex nature of leaders' work.

In the language of practice architectures, metaphors, although traditionally linguistic, not only convey the sayings of practice, but also extend to the ways in which principals enact them (doings) with others (relatings). The metaphor drawn by one interviewee of the *principal as artist* illustrates this point.

I've got the canvas and the paints [sayings]. And yeah, I'm trying to make sure I pick the colours really carefully [doings]. And then there's these amazing artists, which are my staff and my kids and my community that create the picture [relatings]. (i15)
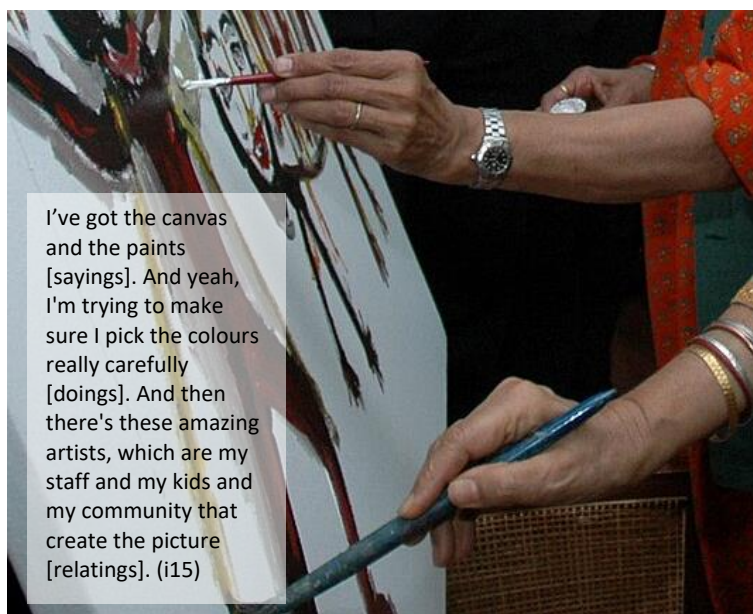
## Quantitative study (survey)

Expanding on a broad defence of a mixed method approach as providing more valid findings and a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (see Figure 2), the quantitative component of IPP was directed to more confidently addressing questions about causality, generalisability, or magnitude of effect (see Fetters, Curry, and Creswell, 2013) arising from the thematic analysis of qualitative data.  In particular, the formulating of a series of hypotheses from these data was aimed at formally testing propositions that appeared to be prominent and convincing in the first round of qualitative data analysis. These hypotheses are tested in the data analysis sections which follow (i.e., Sections 3-5).

The quantitative component was a survey administered through the online survey software *Qualtrics*, with the four sections of the survey framed by the objectives of the overall project:

Section A: You, your role and your school

Section B: Your principal practices

Section C: Job satisfaction and wellbeing

Section D: Reconceptualising the principal role.

The various questions addressed to participants in the survey drew heavily from variables derived in the initial analysis of qualitative data with the analysis of numerical data directed largely to complementary descriptive accounts.

## Demographic profile of respondents and their schools

Over a period of 8 weeks, 197 principals completed the survey, a response rate of about 48% of the collective memberships of the SAPPA, SASPA and SAASLA. The survey instrument contained questions intended to produce specific demographic data about the principal respondents and their schools. Figure 4 shows some characteristics of the respondent cohort.

| Gender | Female | Male | | Total respondents | 197 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 127 (65%) | 70 (35%) | | | |
| **Age** | **31-40** | **41-50** | **51-60** | **>60** | |
| | 20 (10%) | 55 (28%) | 88 (44%) | 34 (17%) | |
| **Number of principal tenures** | **Acting** | **One** | **Two** | **Three** | **Four or more** |
| | 6 (13%) | 73 (37%) | 46 (23%) | 34 (17%) | 38 (19%) |
| **Years in current school** | **<1 year** | **1-3 years** | **4-6 years** | **7-9 years** | **>10 years** |
| | 23 (11%) | 75 (38%) | 46 (23%) | 35 (17%) | 18 (9%) |
| **Expecting to retire / resign this tenure** | **Yes** | | **No** | | **Unsure** |
| | 30 (15%) | | 135 (68%) | | 32 (16%) |

*Figure 4: Data showing characteristics of the cohort of survey respondents (n=197)*

Figure 4 shows that just under two-thirds of respondents are female – a pattern which closely approximates the gender breakdown of principal membership in the associations participating in IPP. *Age* and *Number of principal tenures* categories indicate a highly experienced principal workforce, with the longitudinal profile suggested by these data appearing to impact various considerations in our study, for example, about principal voice, political participation and the desire for greater principal autonomy. An added complexity, in analysis of such considerations, is that half of the respondents are in the first three years of their principalship in their current school. Figures 5-8 show the breakdown of various characteristics of respondents' schools.
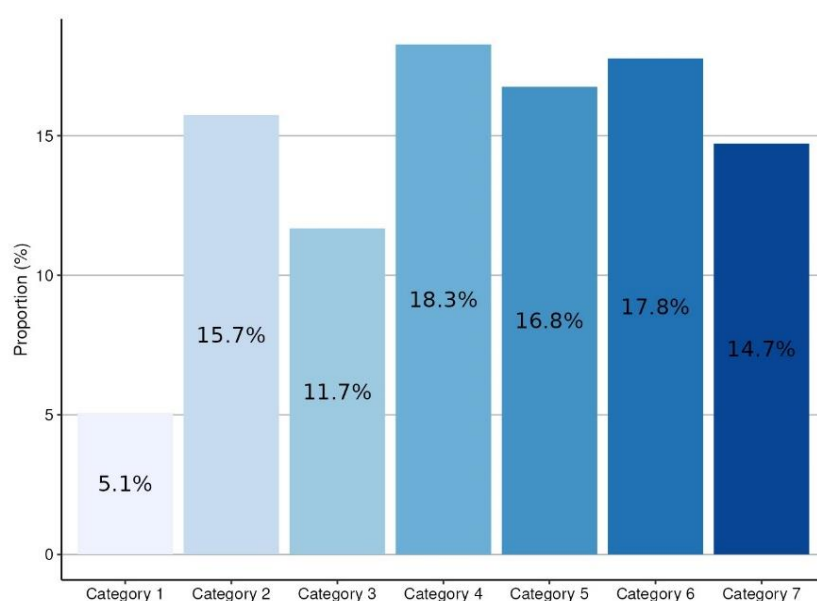


*Figure 5: Data showing survey respondents' school site Index of Educational Disadvantage (IED)*
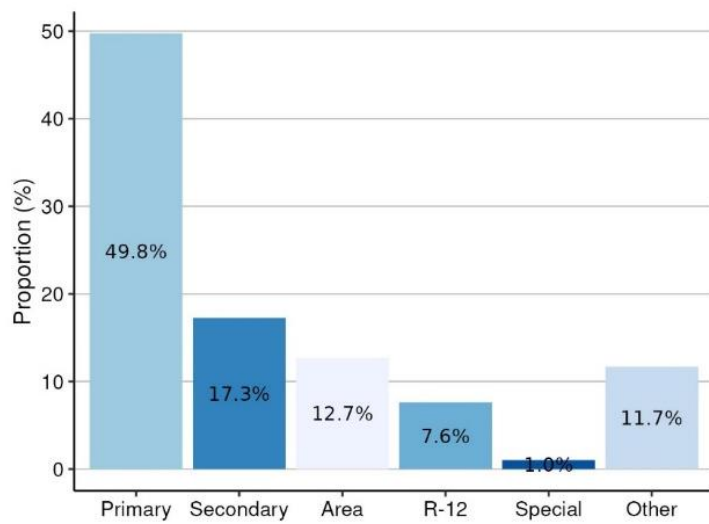
*Figure 6: Data showing respondents' school type*
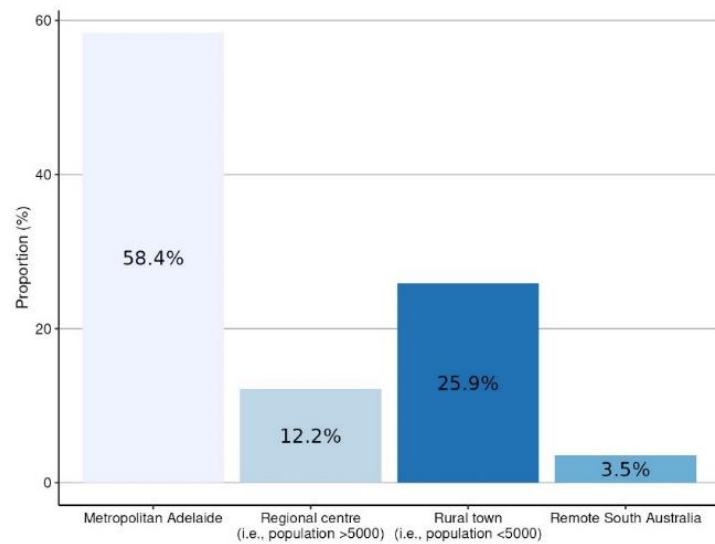


*Figure 7: Data showing respondents' school location*
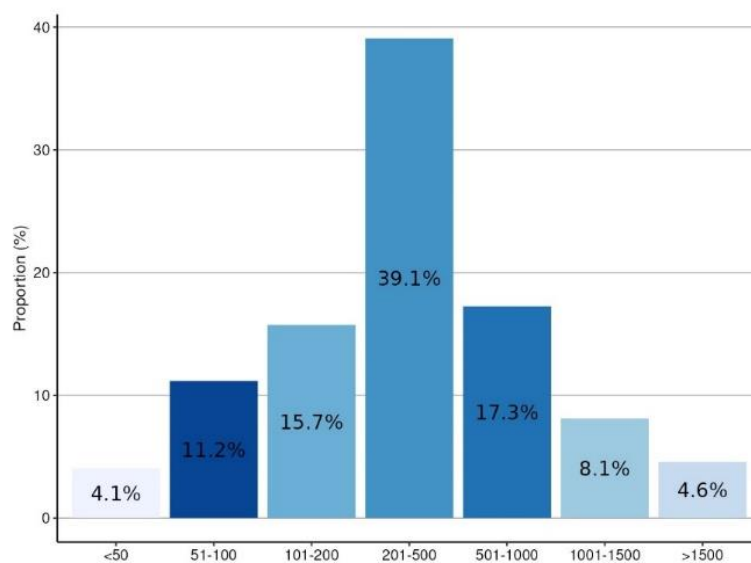


*Figure 8: Data showing respondents' school size*

Demographic data depicted in Figures 5-8 create a range of analytic categories and possibilities for cross-tabulation with other variables in the quantitative study. For example, later in the report:

- *Index of educational disadvantage* data are used to test a hypothesis about relations of IED and student behaviour management.

- Data depicting school location, school size and school type are used to reflect on contextual factors impacting the practices of principals and to develop a case study of principal practice in small schools.

However, a general assertion seems to hold that the most telling 'findings' from data analysis are derived from the thematising of qualitative interview data accompanied by supportive observations from survey data in the quantitative component. In this process, a general tendency to resist dividing the principal cohort into its various parts and, instead, treat it as a single cohort, appears worthwhile and defensible.

## Integration of results

While reference has already been made to the integration of qualitative and quantitative components at the design and methods level of IPP (see Figure 2), this report also seeks to demonstrate productive integration at interpretation and reporting stages. Working from categories described in Fetters et al. (2013), reporting on our project uses approaches such as:

- *Narrative:* weaving qualitative and quantitative findings together.

- *Data transformation:* at various points, the transformation of numerical survey data into descriptive commentary that is compatible with data collected in interview.

- *Joint display:* drawing the data together through visual means (e.g., as charts, tables and illustrations) to draw out insights beyond information gained in the separate components of the project.

As Fetters et al. (2013) note, 'the fit of integration describes the extent the qualitative and quantitative findings cohere' and the 'practices of integration' help researchers 'leverage the strengths of mixed methods' (p. 2134).

Integration, when applied to the presentation of research results in the sections which follow, generally manifests as a sequential and schematic arranging of qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Under the headings in each of the data analysis sections (i.e., Sections 3-5), a number of broad, overarching themes from the qualitative data are identified. Under each of these overarching themes, sub-themes are first elaborated using a 'descriptive and explanatory narrative' to represent key ideas and concepts from the data, along with 'embedded samples of illustrative data' in the form of quotes from interview participants (Harding & Whitehead, 2013, p. 138), Quantitative data is subsequently used in many of these themes to support, enlarge and, at times, refute and complicate qualitative observations. References to relevant literatures are also made to support new lines of discussion, identify future research possibilities and foreshadow recommendations (made summarily at the end of the report).

# 3. Current principal practices and conditions of practice: Constraints and enablers

## Overarching theme: Ways of leading

Many of the themes developed from qualitative data reveal the significant diversity in the interviewee group. While influential factors associated with site context, leadership style and principal experience will be discussed later in this report, 'ways of leading' is a theme that captures something of the heterogeneity of the broader principal cohort in terms of 'the prevalence of different forms of leadership' previously noted in reporting of *Teaching and Learning International Survey* (TALIS) research (OECD, 2020, p. 27). 'Ways of leading' as an overarching theme looks to reveal what principals' understand and recognise as the work of leadership. Using the components of a focus on practice described in the introduction (and further elaborated in Appendix A), this work is: (i) detected in the sayings, doings and relatings of principal practice, and (ii) influenced by the practice architectures that frame and shape them and their practice.

### Sub-theme 1: A preference for cultural leadership

***Practices of cultural leadership:*** In the data distilled from our interview study, many of the most prominent practices principals equate with their provision of site leadership, can be organised around the broad descriptor 'cultural leadership'. While not proposed here as an addition to the array of 'leadership by adjective' (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2007, p. 202) models, cultural leadership is here used to capture practices that principals undertake to establish and maintain a positive, participative and successful culture in their schools. The following summary observations about principals as leaders of school culture can be made from interview data:

- Establishing a positive, participative and successful culture is seen by principals variously as a precondition for improvement, change, job satisfaction, fun, school performance and collaboration.

- Principal effectiveness is both underpinned and driven by effective cultural leadership, with instructional/transformational leadership models depending on the development of particular aspects of school culture.

- Principals associate practices such as leader presence, choosing to be optimistic, building in-school and community connections and investing in professional relationships with their cultural leadership.

- Building the capacity of others is central to providing cultural leadership and connects with practices that divest and delegate leadership responsibility, play to the perceived strengths of colleagues and position the principal as mentor and coach.

- Effective cultural leadership builds high levels of relational trust and is characterised by open and transparent communication and decision making, consistent messaging and effective conversations that challenge unfair and inappropriate behaviours.

- Effective cultural leadership is accompanied by compatible structural change, including the development of charters and agreements that look to bind staff, students and community together in a common purpose.

*Culture is about everyone going in the same direction and it's laughing together. It's having fun together. It's reading the room. You've got to read people. You've got to be kind. You've got to be respectful. You've got to have high expectations, but you've got to know when to bend. (i25)*

*I'd say that you're actually a cultural architect … an architect can create a sense of place, a feeling of home. And I think as principals, that is actually our responsibility to be a cultural architect … you develop a brand allegiance. (i17)*

*I think for me it's about trust … I think people feel that I'm someone that can guide them, and that they trust me and that they know that I will have their backs if they do encounter something. I do like working in an environment where people enjoy being part of a team that cares and likes one another. (i12)*
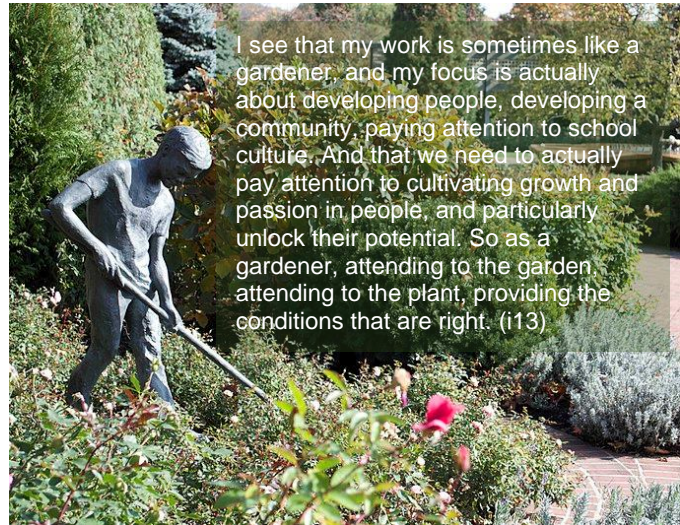
*I see that my work is sometimes like a gardener, and my focus is actually about developing people, developing a community, paying attention to school culture. And that we need to actually pay attention to cultivating growth and passion in people, and particularly unlock their potential. So as a gardener, attending to the garden, attending to the plant, providing the conditions that are right. (i13)*

The priority that principals give to the various aspects of cultural leadership extracted from interview data can be read from data in the quantitative component of IPP. Figure 9 shows how frequently survey respondents engaged in practices of cultural leadership, with more than 70% providing 'often' and 'very often' responses in all categories.
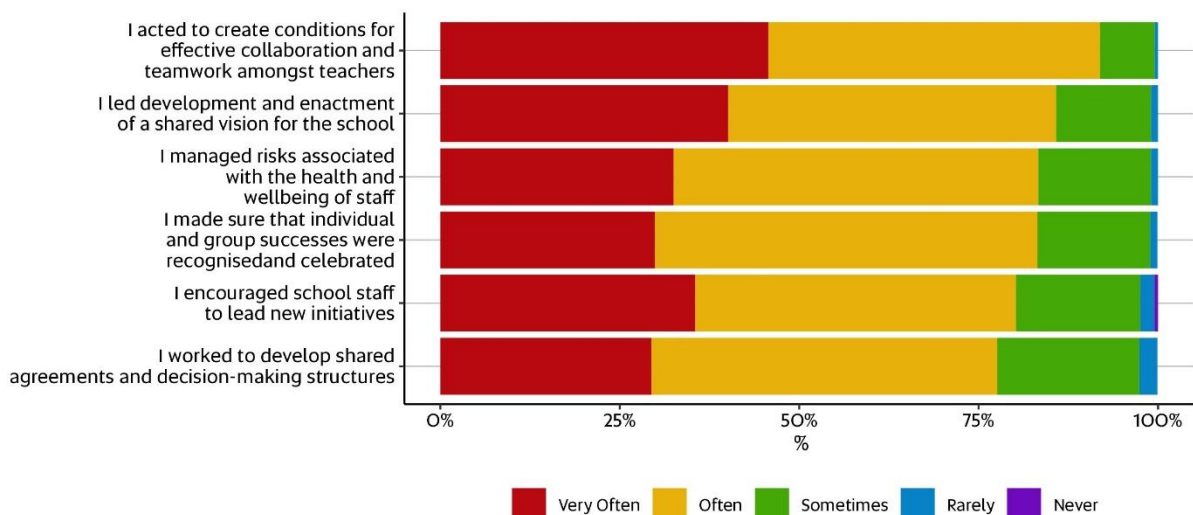


*Figure 9: Enacting cultural leadership (how frequently survey respondents engaged in practice during the last 12 months)*

***Relational practices:*** As well as suggesting a strong principal commitment to cultural leadership, Figure 9 also shows that, of all practice categories, *I acted to create conditions for effective collaboration and teamwork amongst teachers* warranted the most attention. References to teamwork are prominent in extensive qualitative data about relational practices. Forming a sub-set of interview responses about school culture, these data describe deliberate practices of relationship building that principals undertake and that they link to the wellbeing of themselves and others, and to achieving site and personal aspirations. The necessity for strong working relationships is also connected with improved site harmony and relational trust, and to supporting career growth and leader effectiveness in others. Interviewees made reference to the way they attend to an array of relationships, including:

- Principal-student relationships – expressed through student voice initiatives and related ideas about increased student agency, redressing the power imbalance between teachers and students, and countering student apathy and disengagement.

- The teambuilding objective of principal-staff relations – framing a broad set of observations about principal practices that (i) look to build an affinity for the school, including getting 'buy-in' from staff via their efforts to create a unique school identity and a sense of belonging; and (ii) establish formal shared agreements amongst staff.

*I can't stress enough how important relationships are. It's just chapter one, verse one, sentence one. (i40)*

*The principal role primarily is about developing the capacity of people who work in schools, and to develop the capacity of the community to engage in meaningful educational dialogue. The best way to do that is to build connections with people, and to do that you have to have relational safety, and you have to have relational intelligence. (i33)*

*The leader's job is to work on where the holes are in your team, build your team up, play to their strengths. (i2)*

*It's a lot of work to get everyone on the same page and having the same vision going forward. There's been a lot of work done through our leadership teams around developing consistent language, those consistent expectations, co-designing all of that together. It's not just me, saying what I want, it's everyone being able to develop that and having a voice in that decision making process. (i35)*



Coffee runs deep. There is a coffee culture and how we build the leadership around us is a cultural thing. Part of that is about the relational side of coffee. We drink coffee together, we share things together, we are all people who buy coffee - we're kind of all fixated on the same thing, in the pursuit of the perfect cup. Just like coffee people, we're all on a similar journey (i23)



Conducting an orchestra which is usually playing a symphony. It has high performing specialists in there looking to align, to get some cohesive focus. Our orchestra has to work together and support each other, otherwise we could not play that beautiful piece of music … it would be awful. (i5)

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- Relationships with and within leadership teams – singled out as a key set of relationships which impact principal effectiveness, opportunities for sharing responsibility and workload, and the availability of trusted colleagues and wise counsel. These data included small school principal references to an absence of leadership density and the resultant burden on the principal in terms of workload and support.



We were both upside down on the monkey bars. The reason I wanted to share that is because it broke down the stereotype of what a principal was meant to be. (i1)
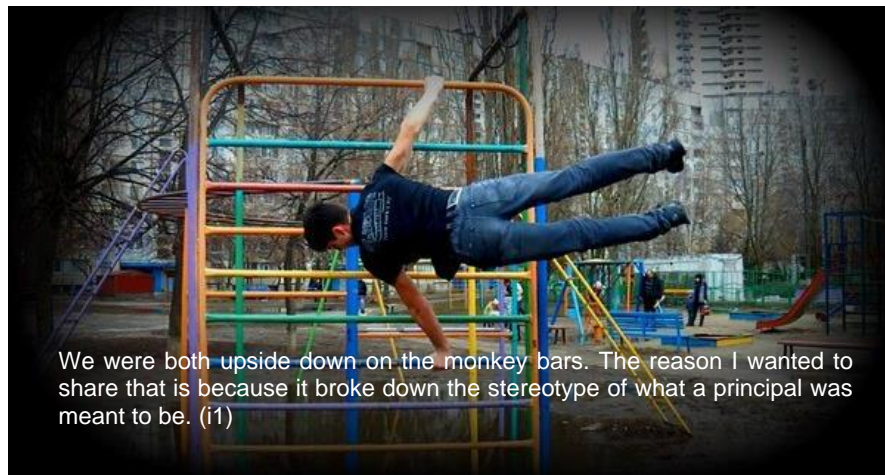
While the survey in the quantitative component of IPP did not dwell heavily on the in-school relational practices of principals, respondents were asked about interactions with the broader community (see Figure 10). When compared with Figure 9, data in Figure 10 shows that principals are generally less often engaged in community interactions than with in-school cultural leadership practices. Figure 10 also shows some complexity in community interactions with principals committing significant time to building regard for teachers and other staff members in the community (73% of responses 'Very Often' or 'Often'), providing parents and guardians with information (64%) and resolving parent conflict (63%).
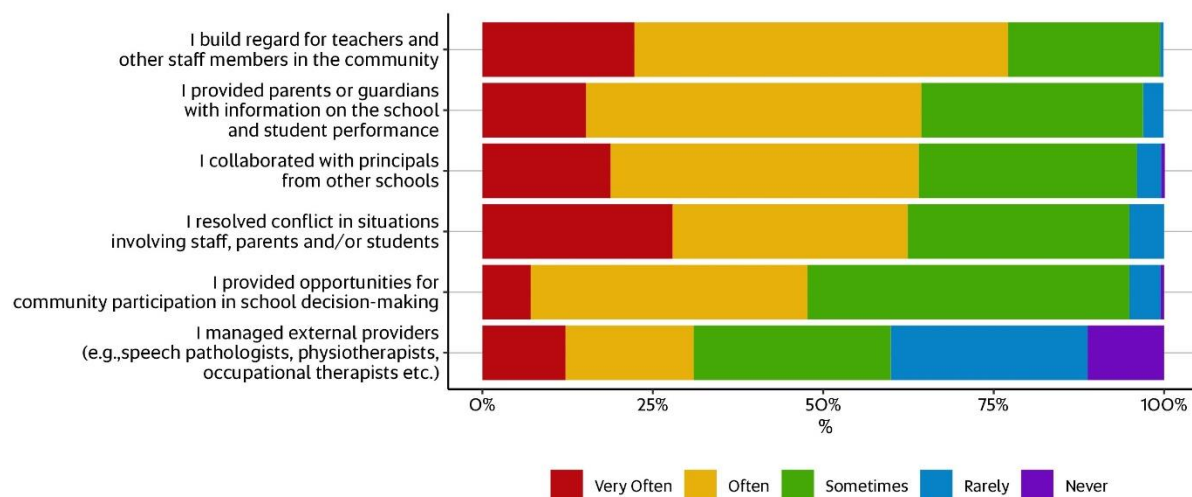


*Figure 10: Interactions with the broader community (how frequently survey respondents interacted with the broader community during the last 12 months)*

***Supportive and collective voice:*** Figure 10 also shows that principals devote significant time collaborating with principals from other schools. This observation from the quantitative component of IPP accords with a rich seam in the qualitative data about the importance principals place on relationships with colleagues in professional networks beyond their schools. Various peer principal configurations are described. Set up, for example, as formal alliances, geographical groupings of principals in like/partner schools and informal (or even ad hoc) gatherings of like-minded colleagues, these groups gain strong endorsement from interviewees in terms of:

- the professional and personal support they offer;

- the opportunity they provide to share resources and ideas;

- the safe environment they create for the confidential sharing of issues and information; and

- the assurance a 'strength in numbers' solidarity that enhances the voice and political participation of members.

Beyond groupings of colleagues, interviewees indicate strong support and high levels of appreciation for their peak associations (i.e., SAPPA, SASPA and SAASLA) and for various national and international groups to which they belong – most notably, in terms of the amount of attention garnered in interview, *Social Ventures Australia*. Interview responses about DfE Partnerships as professional networks were more equivocal. Comments about building productive allegiances and supports in Partnerships are significantly outweighed by negative experiences related to, for example, tendencies towards top-down management, meeting agendas dominated by outside policy interests, and, for secondary schools, a level of alienation when they are the sole secondary principal in their Partnership.

> *I have really supportive relationships with my peer principals … sometimes not having a leadership team, you don't have someone to talk to, to go to if it's been a really bad day, someone who understands. So, we do have a bit of a buddy system. (i7)*
>
> *Our Partnership meetings have been so micromanaged that we don't even have an opportunity to connect and get to know each other. I don't think principals have been looked after well at all. (i50)*
>
> *The Partnership scarcely exists … I find being a secondary school, we're only one player of many once you have the preschools and the primary schools. I'm on the SASPA board and really supportive of the work they're doing to promote the secondary alliances. (i23)*
>
> *I am on the SAPPA board and that really does assist me in terms of being more aware of what is about to happen, or what is happening, or the reasons for policy or for changes in direction from the department. And with that comes the networking of a range of principals, many of whom are far more experienced than me. Or if they're not more experienced, they just have a different lens. So, I think for principals, whether they are long term or short term, they should take the opportunities to work with other principals. (i10)*

## Sub-theme 2: When leadership theory meets principal practice

### *The possibilities in instructional leadership*

Working definitions of principal instructional leadership in the literature translate the theoretical model connecting principal support of teachers and their efforts to improve student achievement to various principal practices such as classroom guidance, resource provision, coaching and mentoring, and teacher professional development (see, for example, Brolund, 2016; Robinson & Gray, 2019). Given this mixture of theory and practice elements, the term 'instructional leadership' is often used interchangeably in this report with the term 'leader of teaching and learning', with the latter seeming to make a more immediate connection in interview with principal practice.

The question of whether principals saw themselves as the leader of teaching and learning in their schools underpinned a fulsome but equivocal set of interviewee responses about those principal practices that might be equated with the provision of instructional leadership. Many mediating and complicating factors emerged as interviewees responded to questions about enablers and constraints. One way of opening up this discussion is to test the priority that principals give to different aspects of their practice. Along these lines, the following hypothesis was formulated:

> Hypothesis 1: Principals will indicate that they spend more time enacting cultural leadership in their schools than leading teaching and learning.

Figure 11: shows the cumulative pattern of responses to two survey questions:

- Question 14 asked how frequently respondents engaged in practices associated with *Leading teaching and learning*; and
- Question 15: asked how frequently respondents engaged in practices associated with *Enacting cultural leadership*.
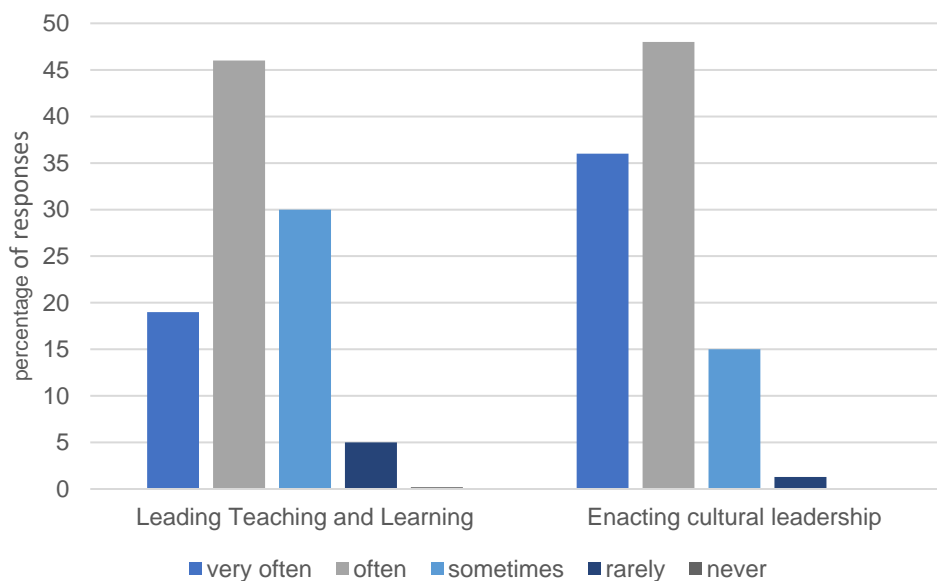


*Figure 11: Cumulative pattern of responses to two survey questions – (a) frequency of engagement in practices associated with Leading Teaching and Learning, and (b) frequency of engagement in practices associated with enacting cultural leadership*

In showing evidence of a higher priority for enacting practices of cultural leadership, the graphs in Figure 11 provide a level of support and corroboration of Hypothesis 1. However, the strongly weighted pattern of 'often' and 'very often' choices in both graphs suggests that cultural leadership and leading of teaching and learning are both considered important by principals in allocating their time to different practices. Slightly lower levels of support for instructional leadership practices, as shown in Figure 11, may be attributed to a range of factors associated with, for example, time constraints, competing priorities and variations in the capacities and interests of individual principals.

One line of flight from this analysis of survey data, is to a lack of consensus about *the principal as instructional leader* that emerged in initial interview questions about ways of leading. While some interviewees were keen to explore the various intersections their work makes with student learning, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and teacher professional learning, others were less certain of (i) having the time and the capacity to direct their leadership to leading teaching and learning, and improving student outcomes, and (ii) whether, in fact, a focus on improving instruction and student learning outcomes amounts to a good use of a principal's time and effort.

These observations appear to complement conclusions drawn from TALIS (OECD, 2020) which claim 'school leaders may be limited in the time and resources needed to express instructional leadership' (p. 51) and 'to enable school leaders to engage more in instructional leadership activities, an important precondition is to ensure that they have the time and support to develop their leadership in the field of curriculum and learning (p. 52).

In the quantitative component of IPP, respondents indicated variations in the amount of attention they give to different aspects of their leadership of teaching and learning (see Figure 12). While the general observation can be made that instructional leadership practices form a significant priority for principals – an observation that will be further confirmed in other analysis of quantitative data later in the report – a more detailed reading of the data shows how principals: (i) are less often working with staff on analysing student achievement data and promoting innovation, (ii) are struggling to prioritise
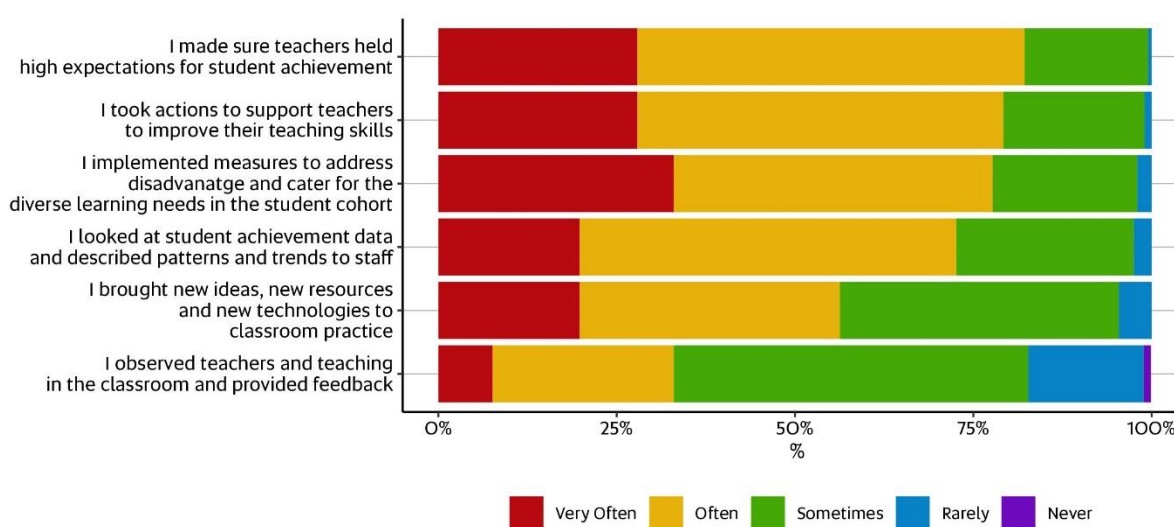


*Figure 12: Leading teaching and learning (how frequently survey respondents engaged in each practice during the last 12 months)*

observing teachers and provide them with feedback on their teaching (an observation that closely accords with qualitative observations), and (iii) address student disadvantage and diverse learning needs as a high priority (see *Social Justice Leadership* later in this section).

The interviewee accounts below are a moderated sample selected for the ways they illuminate instructional leadership as a way of leading. The much broader catalogue of ideas about the principal as instructional leader collected in interview, will be variously used in other sections of the report, including the identification of workload management issues in the next section and reconceptualisation possibilities in Section 5.

> [T]he instructional leadership that I'm involved in mostly here is through other leaders, because of the size of the college and the number of staff we have. I'm working through my executive leaders and my broader leadership team … [to] empower leaders, so that they're all working in the same direction in supporting teachers. (i27)
>
> I have the role of principal, but I'm still a teacher, I'm an educator … I have always tried very hard not to hold myself away from that whole bit about teaching and learning because I need to have credibility with staff. (i6)
>
> I think I would aspire to be an instructional leader. I don't think I'm there. But I think part of that is because of the workload. I don't have time to go into observations and working one-on-one with staff and providing them with feedback that's going to be really relevant and works. I think I've got the trust, but haven't got the time. I think they would see me as one of the leaders of teaching and learning, but I don't think that was set as my sole role. We've got really good coordinators, and they are very much on to that as well. (i18)
>
> I do things like sitting down with staff members to help them plan lessons, sitting down with staff members to unpack the curriculum. And whilst I'm not a specialist in all curriculum areas, I fundamentally understand pedagogy, and I keep up to speed with theory and practice and so on. I take lessons, I model lessons, I co-teach, and so on, because I think there's, particularly in this country, there's a bit of a view that we as principals are administrators, and I fundamentally do not believe that I am. (i16)

### Principal as change agent

Insights into principal practices that are intended to connect with leading school change are dispersed through the interview transcripts and are also detectable in different survey responses in the quantitative component of IPP. In interview, one more tightly focussed area of interest that relates to transformational practices is found in references to the functional importance of vision and values and the capacity of principals to articulate a compelling vision. The empirical work of Hallinger and Heck (2011) emphasises the importance of properly acknowledging the capacity of school leaders to convey a vision for school improvement capable of engaging teachers for the benefit of all students (p. 55). Responses to interview questioning focussed on the difference between the principal's personal vision for the school and the development of a shared vision reveal much about change management practices that accompany gaining agreement on a vison and that are interwoven with the implementation of change which follows.

Along with visioning work, interviewees provided insights into how processes of goal setting, decision-making and conflict resolution, ask principals to display a set of attributes that includes courage, strategic thinking and determination. Participants also highlighted the complexity of pursuing desired change in the amalgam of community aspirations, system demands, research findings and contextual influences. Against this backdrop, 'shared values' and individual 'moral purpose' are rendered by some

interviewees as unifying and mollifying forces, and as possible precursors to effective and lasting change. However, evidence of the time-consuming and stress-causing qualities of principal change work can also be extracted and appear to feed into commentary about the difficulty of consensus and, in its absence, whether or not the principal's vison of reform should hold sway.

Extracted from the previously cited practices for enacting cultural leadership (see Figure 9), Figure 13 indicates the time commitment that principals make to (i) developing and enacting a shared vision, (ii) encouraging staff to lead new initiatives and (iii) developing shared agreements and decision-making structures. Each of the three practices in Figure 13 connects to insights about change management provided in interview. As well as suggesting the imbrication of cultural leadership and school reform, the data depicted in Figure 13 shows responses heavily weighted to 'very often' and 'often' choices suggesting that each of these practices is given priority in the various ways of leading that principals exhibit.
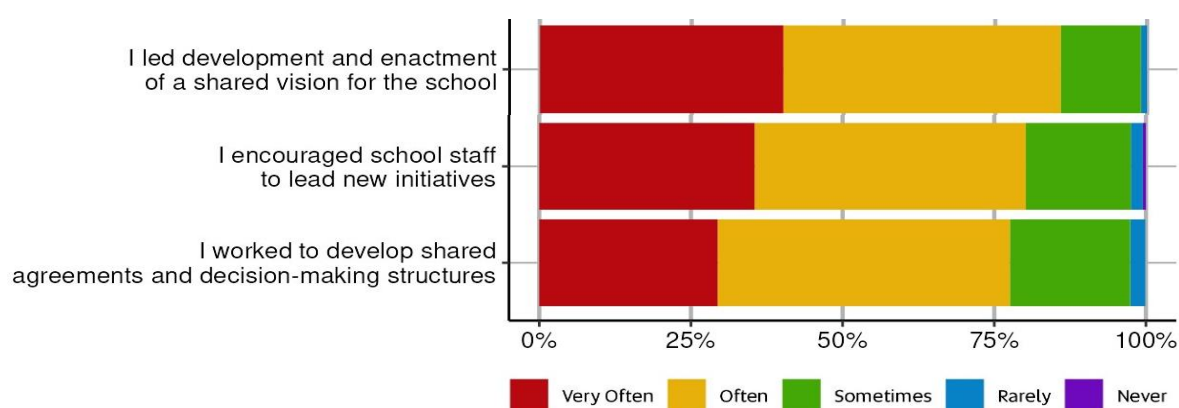


*Figure 13: Principal as change agent (three relevant practices and the time allocation provided to each over the last 12 months)*



[I'm] a bit of a lighthouse and the staff and students and parents being the little boats or ships or whatever they are at whatever capacity … sort of guiding them through some of the stormy seas or some rocks every now and then or a reef might present itself or sandbar. And it's not me, telling them where to go, but helping them get there safely. (i12)

It's very rare that you would get in a racing car and be happy with the performance. Every single cell in your body is looking for that extra ounce of speed, cornering ability, carrying speed through corner, all those things, and that really applies to how I operate as a principal … quite often, when people, who race cars go badly [it's because] they change too many things at once. You've got to know what you've changed, and how it actually improves the performance. (i17)

> *Probably one of the biggest stress points as a leader, is when the directions that I've been given that I have to do don't align with my own personal vision. (i30)*
>
> *It's a collective vision, it's never just mine. I'm the one that does the transforming tasks. (i12)*
>
> *I think [change] takes courage. And I think it takes some really difficult conversations if there is misalignment and there have been moments where I've had to say, 'look, I accept and respect that we all have different points of view, but ultimately, you've got to be with me. (i38)*
>
> *No one's ever confused about what the bigger picture is. It's when we're trying to take that next step, and be rigorous around what the next step is, trying to break things down for staff so that they feel like that they know exactly the path that we're going down. (i22)*

### *Distributing responsibility*

The illuminating qualities of principal practice, shift insights into 'distributive' leadership in our qualitative data away from theoretical models and towards interrelated practices of delegating and distributing responsibility, expanding the leader pool and building the leadership capacities of others. Models of distributed leadership (also variously referred to in the relevant literatures as 'shared', 'collegial', and 'participative' leadership models) appear to take on distinctly utilitarian form in our research, curated under the guiding hand of principals and driven by concerns about equitable distribution of workload. However, more nuanced accounts in interview reveal a strong commitment amongst some principals to recognising the talent of other designated leaders, to matching talent to task and to delegating responsibilities in ways that support the career aspirations of others.

As part of a recurring theme about the impact of school size, our interview data shows that distributive

> *[I]t's very much a distributive leadership model that we have, I have to share all responsibilities. (i13)*
>
> *Developing the depth of leadership, where I can reasonably ask leaders to take on a multitude of tasks and know that they're done well … it's a challenge. We've actually got some very long-term leaders, we've also got some extremely inexperienced leaders. So, the hands-on development of those people and supporting of those people, and then sometimes fixing the gaps when things haven't gone right, have meant instructional leadership is a very difficult thing for me to find. (i23)*
>
> *I think middle leaders are so important in school improvement, they're the drivers, the engine room of improvement. (i5)*
>
> *[I]f you offload something it leaves a hole. They are all connected in some way … I wrestle with this all the time, and it's part of what we do as a leadership team - always trying to find that balance between how much I offload to my other leaders, to other people in school.*
>
> *Certainly, I look to distribute leadership responsibilities across my team, I try and build their capacity, rather than do it all myself. And I found that that works. (i21)*

practices are modified and moderated by the size of a school's leadership team. Principals of large schools with large teams of designated leaders (and with leadership at several different levels) note an imperative to delegate responsibilities, a keenness to build the capacity of other leaders and some willingness to be creative in the way roles are configured and jobs are allocated. Principal interviewees from smaller schools with smaller pools of leaders, and sometimes without any designated leader other than themselves, notice how these distributive opportunities are severely reduced. Additionally, principals in small schools – which are most often in rural and remote locations – note, of leader appointments they are able to make, that new leaders are most often inexperienced and sometimes unwilling to commit to a long stay in their schools.

While the insights of interviewees focus on practical strategies for sharing the load, they also hint at the continued relevance of long-held aspirations amongst scholars of distributed leadership for more dispersed, horizontal and democratic ways of leading. Important in these models but understated in principal-centric research data like those collected in IPP, is what Spillane (2012) calls a move 'beyond the Superman and Wonder Woman view of school leadership' that 'involves the many and not just a few' and is 'about leadership practice, not simply roles and positions' (pp. 3-4). While these insights from the literature exceed the empirical perspectives captured in our study, they attach themselves more obviously to rethinking and repositioning the role of the principal. As such, distributed leadership appears again later in this report as part of thinking about how the role of the principal might be reconceptualised (see Section 5).

## Sub-theme 3: Social justice leadership

The term 'social justice leadership' does not appear in the interview transcripts in the qualitative component or in survey questions and responses in the quantitative component of IPP. Rather, it is a term borrowed and brought into play from interested scholars (see, for example, Furman, 2012; Castrellón, 2020) that captures an array of perspectives given and sensibilities shown at different points in our study. Working from parameters established in the social justice and equity literatures, data from IPP is here assembled under of the broad practices of leading for social justice, with each practice coupled to excerpts from interview.

***A process and a goal:*** Principals treat social justice as both a process and a goal. In interview, this plays out as: (i) a strong commitment, articulated by many participants, to equity of learning opportunities and outcomes, and (ii) an orientation to acting on this commitment.

> *I think it's really important that there are communities like this one where kids who don't fit in big busy schools can find a place. Now, those kinds of kids usually come with a whole range of lived experience that makes their engagement with school a little bit tricky. And so, it's really important that we, as the adults in this place, have a really clear and consistent practice to support those kids, those 300 individuals to come together here and function. (i33)*
>
> *This is a painting that's been done by a member of our community, who was a Kaurna. For me, this is about making sure that we're a culturally safe school … this is about signifying that acknowledgement, and paying tribute to the past and our connection to country. (i45)*

***Equitable treatment:*** Principals insist that schools are sites for the equitable treatment of all students (Dantley & Tillman, 2010). Interviewees identify, in the diversity of their student cohort, a range of complexities and risks to which they must respond and a willingness to be held accountable for their responses.

> *It's very easy to pick off the cream and it makes us look good. But that's not my focus. We are the best school for every child, that's my focus … it's a challenge, without a doubt, because many [high needs students] find it quite intimidating when they're with a group of kids who can be very high performing. So, it's looking at the way we design our learning with multiple entry points, and multiple ways in which students can be successful. We've talked about choice and voice and learning, and really respect that. (i17)*
>
> *In my school we get kids coming from the non-government schools who are too complex for them to deal with. We have them, and they keep coming and it changes the balance. But I would say that the benefit is you are actually in a diverse environment, where you are accountable for meeting the needs of the diverse range of students. (i23)*



Even at this school, which is a very high performing school, you still have a cohort that struggle … you've got children who are performing extremely well [and a] cohort that is significantly underperforming … And so that's why you have that idea of a double-edged sword. Making sure that these other children aren't overlooked, and that the intervention is targeted to catch them up or to get them to their potential. (i44)

***Leader praxis:*** Principals conceive of social justice leadership as 'praxis' – as a way of leading that shifts theory to practice, commits the principal in ongoing reflection and action, shifts emphasis beyond personal interests 'to the long-term interests of each student' (Kemmis & Smith, 2008) and works beyond an individual commitment to influence the practices of others[3]. Interview data shows an individual commitment to social justice amongst many principals that appears to transcend contextual variables about levels of socio-economic disadvantage, geographical isolation and cultural diversity. However, interviewees are generally more suggestive than explicit on the practices they use to impact the commitment of staff, students and the community. Here, equity concerns are often bundled in with drawing others to the principal's vision, and to practices such as forging shared agreements and encouraging innovative practices that have equity implications.

> *Every decision you make, you have to think about 'am I providing enough opportunity, is the equity there for every child to participate and engage?'. It is about making connections for learners that are going to make them feel as though they're part of their learning environment, that they fit, that they connect, that they belong. (i25)*
>
> *I suppose it's a bit of a metaphor, public education being linked to a democratic society. It's ensuring that all children are educated so that they can be citizens within a democratic society. It's that inclusive practice. I'm making sure that the barriers, whether they be cultural barriers, disability barriers, or trauma barriers, are constantly monitored and addressed, so that they can have that access too. (i50)*
>
> *With kids the conversation is 'it doesn't matter where you come from, or how much money your parents earn, or what house you live in, what you do is down to you'. And 'your efforts here will level that playing field so you can get into the game, but it's on you'. And 'what happens to you out there should have no bearing on what you can achieve in that classroom'. That's the driver for me in terms of equity here, I'll make sure you've got all the resources you need; I'll make sure that you have all the access you need. Once you walk through these doors, I can't control what happens to you outside, but in here I can. (i33)*

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[3] Leader praxis will be further considered in the context of reconceptualising the principal role in Section 5.

***Contextualised perspectives.*** Principals contextualise the perspective they are taking on social justice (see Figure 1) and are 'responsive to the context and history of the particular school site' (Grootenboer & Hardy, 2017, p. 402). In our study contextually rich examples abound that highlight inequities to be addressed in terms of socio-cultural, geo-spatial, economic, cultural, political and relational variables. These categories translate into prominent lines of discussion in interview including historical and contemporary effects of the city/country school divide, variations in the treatment of large and small schools (e.g., in terms of resourcing, staffing and curriculum), catering for different levels of diversity and the addressing links between levels of affluence and school marginalisation and residualisation in a marketised schooling environment.

> *I'm all about equity and rural kids accessing good teaching and learning … they should be able to get the same education here as they can get anywhere. (i26)*
>
> *We need to talk about things like gender identity that can be really sensitive in cultural groups. Our system has really clear expectations of how we manage it. Sometimes they are quite incompatible with some religious and cultural beliefs. So trying to get a conversation around unisex toilets and things like that can't just happen. The education department says 'that's what equity is therefore you've got to do it'. It doesn't work that way. We need to work deeply with community, right? (i15)*
>
> *So having an autism diagnosis should not be a barrier to achievement. And there is no reason why a kid with autism can't get an A, in English or in Maths or whatever. My job is to provide the accommodations and supports that will allow them to do that. (i33)*
>
> *There is an emerging issue where we've got a number of kids from very traumatic backgrounds who are not actually achieving, and certainly in our community down here, the support structures for families and these kids are pretty well non-existent. (i14)*
>
> *A lot of students don't have a lot of confidence, or they're quite new to Australia, or they've had significant trauma, or they have a really challenging home life or high numbers of children that come that are in care [who] have been separated from their traditional family environment. And it's around, having enough resourcing around them, to feel heard, and to have relationships with lots of different adults at school. (i25)*

***Local activism****.* Principals' commitment to social justice as a local 'activist' practice that proactively informs their planning and decision-making, is applied across broader areas of responsibility, such as leadership of resourcing, staffing, infrastructure and curriculum provision, and takes account of the needs of all stakeholders. The 'activist' quality in principal practice emerges across a range of themes and sub-themes in this study. For example, it appears to be embodied in local actions that address contextualised social justice concerns but that are outside or against the orthodoxy of system-led policy, in change initiatives that target local equity concerns and/or are directed to the needs of specific school cohorts, and in imaginative ways of addressing inequities arising from systemic processes (such as staffing, and curriculum and resource provision).

> *For me, that's a fight, that's a political fight … so I'll go into bat for them out there in the Department … I'm relentless. I'll just keep asking. I'll keep saying if I think that something is unfair, or unjust, or that the formula is ineffective, then I'll just keep pursuing it. (i33)*
>
> *Inclusion and equity, I think, that has underpinned my growth as an educator … It plays out for staff and for students and the broader community, I believe. That's certainly what I aim to do. And it's around open discourse, people taking responsibility for their actions and the impact of their actions on others. It's about making sure that everybody has a safe place, staff and students and the broader community. I say working with all members of the community because the main driver is around ensuring that everybody feels that they're treated fairly, and that they had the same opportunities. (i38)*

Social justice leaders ask critical questions that centre on redressing disadvantage in historically marginalized communities, and which disrupt the status quo. In the fraught and risky space of critique and resistance, many principals claim a keenness to have a voice on various issues relevant to their leadership, including social justice issues. A few describe, in their systemic interactions, engaging in acts of questioning, ignoring and pushing-back. While interviewees do not explicitly link these practices to equity, a concerted line of resistance seems to emerge in expressions of opposition to the inequitable outcomes of the current policy inclination to school competition, comparison and parental choice.

# 4. The broad umbrella of job satisfaction

A key objective of the IPP research project was to support a more expansive and complete rendition of the current principal role. Using the conceptual resources provided by Practice Architecture Theory creates fruitful possibilities for expanding on insights assembled from data analysis in the previous section under a 'ways of leading' theme. As well as continuing a descriptive analysis of the 'sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings' of principals, the resources of Practice Architecture Theory allow a conceptualisation of the way principal participation in these practices is preconfigured and shaped by conditions and possibilities of practice – what Kemmis et al. (2014) describe as the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements present in or brought to a site (p. 33). In the complexity of these conditions and possibilities (see also Appendix A), *job satisfaction* emerged in data analysis as an 'umbrella' concept and an explanatory tool that can be applied to multiple aspects of the current principal role. It is under the job satisfaction umbrella that themes of *ongoing challenges and new complexities*, *system membership, accountability and autonomy,* and *principal wellbeing* are now unpacked.

## Overarching theme: Ongoing challenges and new complexities

In permeating many of the principal practices described by interview participants, an analysis of 'ongoing challenges and new complexities' does not rely on responses to a specific interview question but rather works as a broad and pervasive 'theme' emerging from 'a feel for the overall meaning of the whole set of data' rather than as a 'category' of principal work (Harding & Whitehead, 2013, p. 151). Treated as an overarching theme, the ubiquitous quality of various challenges and complexities is suggested, along with qualities of emergence and persistence.

### Sub-theme 1: Intensification of the work

In line with several other research inquiries into the work of principals (see OECD, 2020; Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020; Niesche et al., 2023), participants in the qualitative component of IPP report a significant increase in the amount of time they devote to school administration. The administrative workload of principals involves a myriad of tasks and responsibilities ranging across financial and facilities management, staffing, incident reporting, data collection, and meeting accountability requirements. Words like 'admin', 'paperwork' and 'red tape' appear in interview transcript, not only as catchalls for this work, but often to indicate feelings of drudgery, futility and resentment that accompany it. These feelings are commonly connected to a perception of intensification, noted in comments about a tipping of the balance of principals' work towards administration and observations of how the principal is now positioned, and thought of in the school community, as an 'administrator' rather than an 'educator'.

> *I feel like in our roles, you know, we're expected to have it all. So instructional leadership and administrator. I don't think there are very many people that are able to balance the two. (i41)*
>
> *I want to do more leading learning; I want to do less admin. Upfront and honest. (i4)*

In describing the issue of principal workload as 'less admin, more people' (i26), one interviewee captures a broadly held position that the increased administrative workload has robbed principals of the time needed to work on the tasks they consider more important and better aligned to their owns

skills, predispositions and commitments. Most prominent amongst the negative impacts cited is the loss of time principals can devote to the needs of their teachers, students and the broader school community. To further test perceptions of disproportionate demands made on principals to do administrative work and a related squeezing out of their interactions with students, the following hypothesis was formulated:

<span style="color:#4472C4">**Hypothesis 2: Principals would prefer to spend less time on Administrative Practices in comparison to Student Interactions**</span>
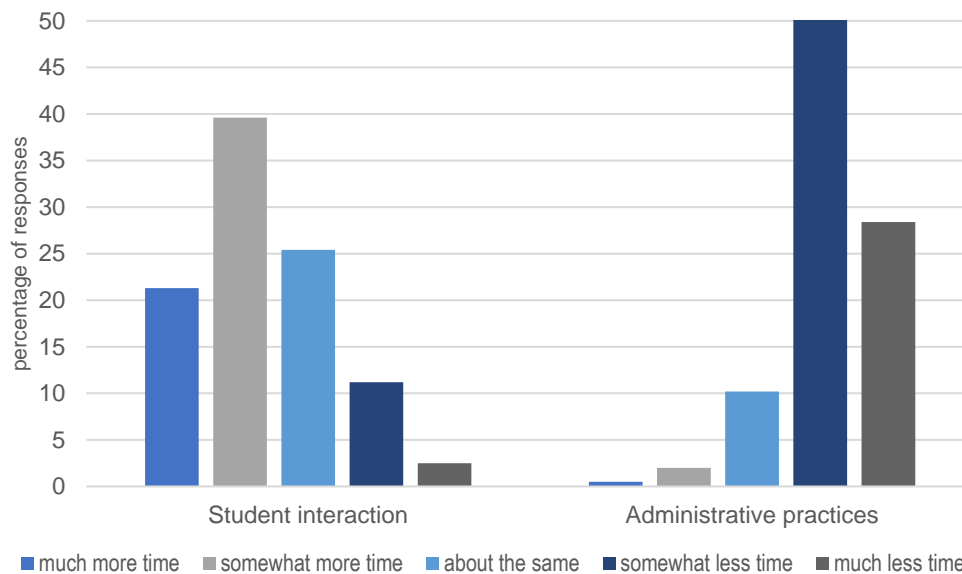


*Figure 14: How principals would prefer to be dividing their time: comparison of responses*

Figure 14 shows a comparison of responses to a survey question about how principals would prefer to be dividing their time. The graphs show clearly the desire expressed by survey respondents to spend 'somewhat more time' or 'much more time' on *student interactions* (120/62% of respondents) *a*nd 'somewhat less time' or 'much less time' on *administrative practices* (172/91%). Therefore, the hypothesis is strongly supported by survey data.

Figure 14 uses data extracted from a more comprehensive question about principals' time/task priorities that is more fully utilised in the context of reconceptualising the principal role in Section 5. Here it supports interviewee comments about an intensified administrative workload, with several conjuring images of a desk-bound principal, fixed in their office by the apparent importance and urgency of administrative requirements and suffering the consequences in terms of take-home workload, disconnection with teachers and students, and reduced influence and credibility.

> *HR takes a lot of time and the systems in that space are really archaic. (i35)*
>
> *The management stuff, you can't escape it. It's part of our role as a principal, but I think it's really out of balance, with the demands of the job. (i23)*
>
> *Some days, I just need to sit and be on my computer the whole day, when I'm supposed to be in the classroom watching my teachers and being an instructional leader (i7)*
>
> *I'll always make time for parents, teachers and students, I think that's paramount. I think the admin side can bog you down. And you can get tied up in that and you could never leave this office … you get very out of touch. And I think you don't have that real trust and respect and finger on the pulse in a lot of ways … you find yourself doing a lot more outside of hours. (i21)*
>
> *… given that I'm the only full-time leader, if my time has been taken up with administrative tasks it means that I'm not connecting with the community, not connecting with kids. (i41)*

The data on administrative workload contains frequent calls to shift administrative tasks away from principals, with some interviewees advocating the prioritising, forestalling or ignoring of outside directives to do administrative work. The apparent simplicity suggested by these comments is countered by complexities, highlighted by other interviewees, in the way many tasks are interconnected with each other and with teaching and learning responsibilities such as curriculum provision, recruitment and retention of quality teachers, improving student learning outcomes and teacher professional learning. As one participant notes, 'you can't leave things on your desk … because when you do, that's when things go really wrong' (i3).

The escalating and pressing qualities suggested in a sub-theme of 'work intensification' appear to have two other clear manifestations in interview data. Firstly, the increased availability of principals made possible by the 24/7 reach of email and social media communications.

> *I'd put my kids into bed at night and I'd spend the next two hours scrolling emails. And then of course, you'd have reactions to emails … I think we should if we're going to protect our profession, we need to set clear boundaries of what's appropriate work hours. (i2)*
>
> *You can never kind of stop working because communications come through at all hours of the day and night, from community, from staff, from whoever. It's really hard to switch off and have downtime … But ultimately, I don't know how you get past that. Because sometimes I need to know those things outside of school hours. (i35)*

While identified as a direct source of work intensification for principals, especially associated with parent-school communication, participants in our study more often identified the need to reduce the impact of constant communication on their teachers as a higher priority. Third-party learning management systems, in which many schools have invested, were also linked to an exacerbation of 'digital connectedness' with several participants suggesting a need to develop in-school and system wide policy to regulate the times when principals and teachers can be contacted.

> *What is reasonable as a professional teacher? What are the mandates that I put on my staff? Because parents do believe that if I sent them that, and they got the message, why didn't they do what I asked? (i4)*
>
> *… trying to deal with the level of parenting that has emerged in the last five to 10 years and the sense of entitlement. A teacher of a class can expect five to ten parents to contact them every day about something. (i30)*
>
> *Our parents are much more political about their child and advocating for their child and … they've been told by the system that every child is an individual. That expectation that sits in our community does not match our resources. (i3)*

Secondly, a less explicit but broadly detectable source of work intensification for principals is found in interview data that points to the 'primacy' of the principal – to 'the centrality of the principal in the life of the school' (Dolan, 2020, p. 159). While some observations, aligned with repeated declarations that 'the buck stops with me' and 'I am the front-face of the school', suggest a willing acceptance of prime responsibility, others point more directly to the negative consequences of parents insisting 'on going straight to the top' and feelings of vulnerability that go with being the school's central figure. Following more oblique lines in the qualitative data, intensification of principal primacy appears to

> *But I think the accountability comes down now to the principal, so that everything rests on their head. You are definitely more vulnerable, because you are being taken to task for anything that doesn't work in your school. (i30)*
>
> *The challenge, though, is often parents aren't satisfied unless they talk to the principal. And so in some situations, you just have to make that time to work with some of those more challenging families. And that takes a lot of time. And that's a big part of my work. (i35)*

correspond with several interconnected shifts in outside influences – the practice architectures – that frame principals' work. Elevating the importance of the principal over that of others in the school means that the success of the school appears to have become increasingly conflated with the quality of the leadership principals provide.

Our data shows some evidence that this view may have taken hold, not only in local school communities, but also through tightening of demands for policy compliance, typically associated with data-led literacy and numeracy improvement. Principals at the front-line of policy implementation are subject to judgements made about them and their schools based on these narrow measures, with the high-stakes nature of the measures reflected in the comparisons, rankings and hierarchies they allow and the attendant risks and outside interventions they create for schools and principals.

> *I think what's taken up principals' energy so much in the past, is you had to have the canvas of compliance, while behind it you were doing the really important work. (i39)*
>
> *I think there's probably a higher expectation now from community that the outcomes of the school are entirely driven by the principal. (i29)*
>
> *There's more compliance going on in particular at the moment … I just completed an ESB (Education Standards Board) self-review for the school. We have our regular external reviews that come up … our school improvement plan process has become a lot more intensive in the last two or three years, it's become something that we're meant to be doing. And it's a really positive thing [but] it's just an extra workload placed on leaders and staff members. (i8)*

Further intensification, aguably as a side-effect of mixing perceptions of school quality with perceptions of principal effectiveness, can be noted in the growing confidence of parents and school communities to voice their approval or otherwise of the way the principal is performing. More expansively, the increased power and prevalence of parent voice appears to have broadly infiltrated the lives and work of principals as both a productive resource as well as a source of workplace stress, nuisance and overloading.

> *[Parents will] come in and observe children in the classroom. And then I would use the word 'badger' other teachers and send emails. So, we've had to be the gatekeeper there, because for our team, that's not okay. (i49)*
>
> *You know, we've got our parents that are coming through now, they are the Facebook generation, you know, they are on Instagram, they are LinkedIn. And they expect to be responded to immediately. (i3)*
>
> *[T]here are also the local community desires, which are important. And I think that's where we have to find ways to give voice to the community, to actually be able to talk to the local community about things which are locally important … we do respond to that in terms of how we're connecting with community organisations, how we connect it to the directly with the parents, how we take that voice on board, and shape it into our school priorities. (i23)*

## Sub-theme 2: A changing student cohort

In interview, the most often cited of the new complexities imposed on principal practice are those associated with a changing student cohort. Data depicting this change suggest that it is prevalent and deeply influential. Figure 15 summarises a range of insights extracted from interview data, depicting them schematically as a set of interrelated causes, effects and responses. As Figure 16 is a simplification of this complex shift, the following comments provide more detailed insights into the effects listed and are suggestive of difficult new classroom and management challenges, heightened disruption and increased workloads, along with attendant feelings of concern, frustration, inadequacy and anxiety.

**Aspects of complexity**
Interviewees noted an increase in …
- learning difficulties
- students with disability
- trauma backgrounds
- behavioural issues
- violence
- increased apathy / lack of aspiration and direction

**Impacts**
Interviewees noted related intensification in …
- classroom and school behavior management issues
- safety issues
- parental involvement / interference
- enrolment issues (e.g., impacts on parent choice, becoming a de facto specialist school for certain cohorts)

**Classroom / pedagogical implications**
Interviewees noted implications for teaching and learning …
- teacher resistance to adapting practice to cater for changing cohort
- increased involvement of external providers
- increased SSO presence in classrooms
- need to personalize learning

**Responding to complexity**
Interviewees noted a range of responses …
- broader and more engaging curriculum offerings
- consistent management practices / shared agreements
- transforming ways of managing complex behaviours
- stronger focus on student wellbeing

*Figure 15:  New student complexities: Interrelated causes, effects and responses*

> *[T]he disruption to our learning environment is so unbelievable … a teacher in a mainstream classroom does not have the skill to be able to handle that. Plus, we're meant to be teaching the other children. And this is not tier one, wave one, differentiated teaching, this is a wave two or three child in the room, when they can't be in the room. That's when the leader is chasing them, or regulating them, so no one's teaching. I do think it's becoming really unsafe. (i5)*
>
> *And we've got wellbeing leaders, and we've got a youth worker as well, because there are significant numbers of kids who, and whether anxiety is another thing that's over diagnosed or we feed it in kids, I'm not sure, but certainly, we have our share of mental health issues and students who struggle. (i19)*
>
> *That's an incredible workload, if you are a teacher with six different classes of 27 kids having to record and report on the adjustments that you make for individual learners in those classes. (i3)*
>
> *We've got a disability unit that has two special classes. So with that comes a lot of complexity and a lot of individual needs, particularly around high level violence, and how that manifests in that space …. In the first semester alone, I've done 22 exclusions from school, (i35)*

The data collected in the quantitative component of IPP is supportive of the range of insights gathered from interviewees. This support is well illustrated in Figure 16 which shows significant proportion of responses in the 'a lot' and 'quite a lot' categories for impacts such as: *An increase in the number of students with special needs* (77.2%), *Greater complexity in the student cohort creating more challenging classroom learning conditions* (76.6%), and *A shortage of teachers who are equipped to teach students with special needs* (60.4%).
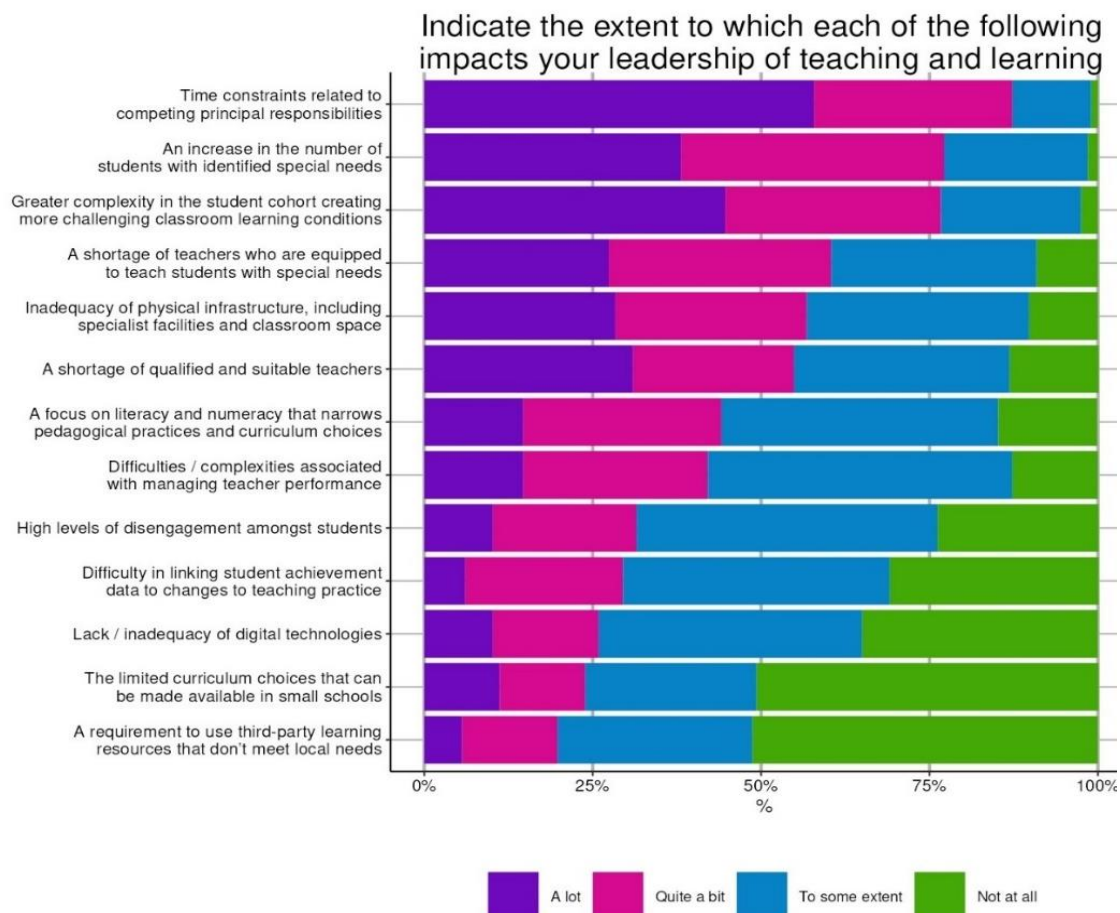
## Sub-theme 3: Managing the workload

The already discussed sub-themes of *work intensification* and *a changing student cohort* connect axiomatically with challenges and complexities for principal in workload management. As well as the detailed connections already made and described above, broader and more generic areas of concern that connect workload management with job satisfaction and wellbeing can also be discerned from interview data. The following are presented summarily using sayings that individual principals used in interview as headings under which various challenges of workload management are assembled:

- ***Days are for people, nights are for paper*** captures, at least in part, the prioritising and managing of time and tasks that principals undertake. Many interviewees commented on their long hours of daytime work and the necessity of working after-hours and on the need they felt to balance people-work and paperwork.

- ***I wear many hats*** also talks to multiple responsibilities, but in its broader application in interview, runs to ideas about competing demands and divided loyalties. The notion of 'being stretched' was variously connected with the impositions of external policy (for example in preparing for school reviews, managing critical incidents and excessive requirements for data collection), with management responsibilities that take up an inordinate amount of time (including managing staff underperformance, facilities and finance) and to out-of-school meeting and school promotion commitments.

- While ***keeping the plates spinning*** again picks up on the multiplicity of tasks, it is also suggestive of other aspects of workload management noted in interview. For example, in trying to do many things at once, participants commented on reduced efficacy and effectiveness, the risk of unsustainability and diminished job satisfaction. Others commented on the ecological/interrelated quality of different responsibilities and suggested that this connectedness made the shedding or abandoning of discrete tasks or ignoring or procrastinating on outside demands risky and counterproductive.

- ***Holding the line*** and ***staying the course*** evoke personal leadership qualities, such as confidence, determination and consistency, that principals strive to muster and consistently display. Applied to workload they connect to comments made in interview about: (i) the 'cognitive load' on principals 'responding to so many different scenarios' (i35) and (ii) to the 'emotional labour' of paying ongoing attention to building 'a sense of belonging, purpose and fulfillment' (i17). As Wilkinson et al. (2021) observe of school leaders, 'caring practices are variously bundled together with other emotions as part of the labour of leading' (p. 157).

The following excerpts from interview provide more detailed insights into the challenges described above as well as making direct links between workload management, work priorities, sustainability of current practices and principal wellbeing.

> *I think the all-consuming nature of the role now means that it's very hard to have any downtime, it is something that you do, live and breathe, I often sacrifice my own children and family time to do my work. That's a choice I'm making at the moment but is potentially not a choice I want to make into the future. (i35)*
>
> *I like to lead by example, in the main, but I see myself as wearing many hats. I know people talk about instructional leadership, transformational leaders, et cetera, et cetera. I think all good leaders, and particularly at principal level need to use that whole range of leadership skills for different situations. (i27)*
>
> *… if I look in hindsight, 80 hours a week isn't sustainable. But I do it because I don't want sleep, I want kids to be successful. You do it because it's a passion. I then look back and go, 'where have I gone wrong?'. (i2)*
>
> *Outside of the school day, is when I do the paperwork. I come to work early, that's my choice, I do the things I have to do. And then during the school day I am in classrooms, talking to kids in the yard, doing walkthroughs … I choose to be visible in my school [rather] than sitting away in my office doing the other things. (i34)*
>
> *… the department is actively trying to look at how they reduce workload. The issue is it's all so interlinked. You can't take one thing out without it being linked on to this and this. And so it would be a very conscious decision to say I'm no longer going to do that. And then how do you then make sure that that doesn't impact the other decision making that you need to do? (i20)*
>
> *I've divested myself of a lot of aspects of HR, facilities and finance. But if you don't actually keep a guiding hand on those things, then you don't know what's going on your school. (i39)*
>
> *And you're stretched so thin, that your enjoyment level drops, and therefore your job satisfaction drops, and therefore your wellbeing drops. And that is a problem across the state and across Australia. (i30)*

While survey data from the quantitative component of IPP offers broad support to the insights of interviewees about principal workload and the juggling of competing responsibilities, it more usefully shows how the tasks to be managed and juggled are differently prioritised and make differently weighted demands. In revisiting the pressing claims that administrative and management tasks make of principal's time, Figure 17, shows how principals feel compelled to prioritise these tasks over other responsibilities. Survey respondents indicated that, on average they spend 25.9% of their time on *Administrative Tasks* and 22.5% on *Management Tasks.* By comparison, Curriculum and teaching-related tasks (13.3%), Staff Support (13.3%) and Student interactions (13.4%) command, on average, a significantly lower proportion of principals' time.
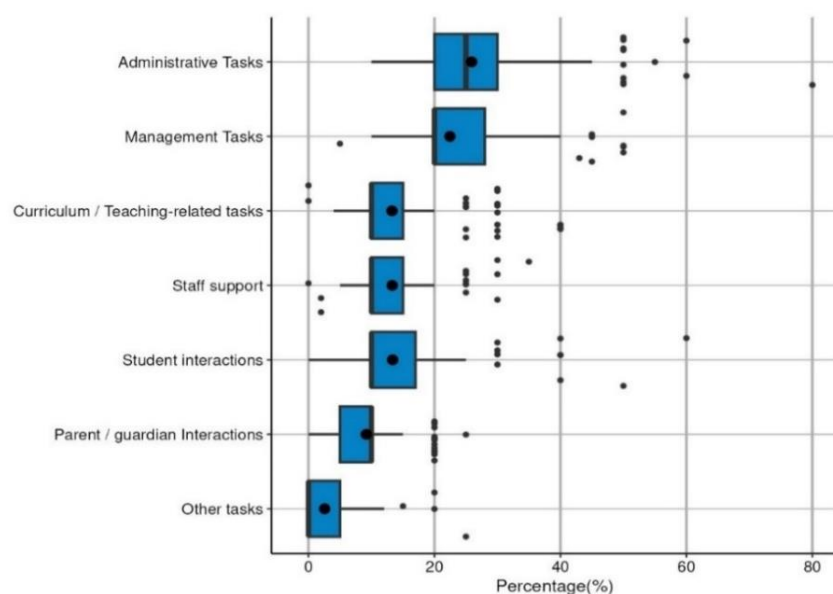


*Figure 17: Percentage of time principals spend on various tasks*
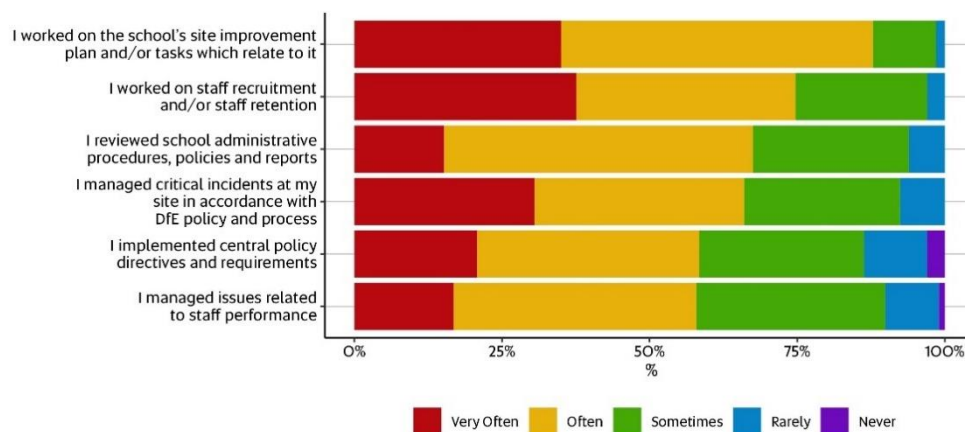
*Figure 18: Attending to administrative and management responsibilities*

Figure 18 provides more detailed descriptive insights into the make-up of principals' administrative and management workload. While the componentry is easily read from the graph, an important part of the workload can be noted in attention to human resource management (HRM) responsibilities. In particular, survey responses to the statement *I worked on staff recruitment and/or retention* show that 75% of respondents 'very often' or 'often' attend to this responsibility, while *I mange issues related to staff performance* attracted a 58% 'very often'/'often' response rate.

HRM also commands significant attention across various overarching and sub-themes in qualitative data analysis. The following excepts from interview are included because of their relevance to principal workload. Other HRM matters are discussed under the overarching theme *of Shifting the load* in Section 5.

*There are a lot of forced placements by the department that we have to take …. when I turned up here, one of the hardest things was trying to get everybody on board. It was hard work. It was very hard work. (i30)*

*Staff in rural areas is probably the biggest lack … [and] the time that it takes now is probably gone up about 15 to 20% on the last five years. So that's a fair chunk. (i1)*

*I have a disproportionate amount of part time teachers …. I'm all for that but it just adds another layer of complication that I don't think is addressed or acknowledged or supported. (i40)*

*So, we got a run and it's got 50 people on it and my daily ops person, because they're so rare Maths Science teachers, he emailed an SMS to every one of those 50. And half of them are either permanently in the private system, dead, or have retired. And you think, how can we not as a system be sending an SMS out to that list every year to go, 'can you just tell me if you're available or not?' … We would have wasted 30 or 40 hours for nothing. (i19)*

## Overarching theme: System membership, accountability and autonomy

Paradoxical qualities of the system membership of principals, can be constructed from the tension between frequent expressions in interview of deep commitment to the broader system of state schooling and the already described local loyalties that principals exhibit (see also Dolan, 2020a). While tension and paradox create a theoretical frame for thinking about system membership, applying a practice lens supports a more pragmatic reading of the way principals are enjoined with the priorities, processes and personnel that they regard as 'part of the system'. In interview, connected sub-themes of accountability and autonomy can be gleaned from a broad commentary about working in and with the broader system – sub-themes that not only appear to jostle and overlap, and to excite and disappoint, but that also elicit contrasting and wide-ranging perspectives from principal participants.

### Sub-theme 1: Working in and with the system

***Policy work:*** Policy work provides a useful entrée into the system membership of principals. While variously positioned as advocates, conduits and technicians in enacting system-led policy in schools (see, for example, Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012), interview data in our study suggests that the policy work of principals, in practice, takes on many other shapes and forms. High levels of compliance, and a readiness to shift school directions and priorities according to shifts in policy, are contrasted with strong critique of centralised policy that does not align with local needs. Compliant responses can also be contrasted with various acts of subterfuge, push-back and resistance described in interview and captured more productively as 'principal voice' in Section 5 of this report.

> *I think that the structure is in place … so that we know what to do when to do it. And this is the format I would prefer rather than a choose your own adventure. (i26)*
>
> *Sometimes my job becomes safeguarding my staff and my kids from policy that is nonsensical and unworkable. (i16)*
>
> *As much as possible, I try to filter out what's expected of us from central office to minimise the impact on what teachers need to do. (i31)*
>
> *I tend to filter policy to look at how we can value add to what we're currently doing. And so, whilst there is an expectation that we would implement whatever it is that we're supposed to implement, I tend to differentiate - identify the key areas that I think will fit within the current climate and context of the school. (i14)*

***The principal – ED relationship:*** In personalising systemic-school relations, the most often cited relationship – accumulating as about 5000 words of interview transcript – is that between a principal and their immediate line manager, their Educational Director. This relationship evokes a range of strong reactions founded on a set of variables that appear to mediate and permeate formal and informal interactions. Listed summarily, these variables suggest a more instrumental reading of the desirable qualities principals look for in an Educational Director. They include qualities like being approachable and supportive, building high levels of relational trust, developing a strong knowledge of the school and its community, advocating on behalf of the school (and the principal) and providing expert coaching/mentoring and timely career advice.

However, this generic reading of the ED's qualities fails to capture more equivocal views provided in interview. These include references to:

1. *Significant variations in the personal qualities, capabilities and leadership styles exhibited*: amidst these variations - depicted by one interviewee as approaches that range across the ED cohort from micromanagement to laissez-faire (i10) – principals who describe positive qualities (e.g., supportive, approachable, knowledgeable etc.) in their line managers appear more likely to position them as central and influential figures in their professional lives.

2. *Different ways of doing policy*: following Dolan and Mader (2024) IPP data suggests that all EDs are interested in issuing to principals 'a hard-to-resist invitation to become more amenable to central directives via system-led processes of communication, line management, and accountability' (p. 170). However, based on recounts of direct experiences of interactions with EDs, for example, in school visits, performance discussions and Partnership meetings, principal participants contrast those EDs who appear to confine this work largely to transmitting systemic policy objectives to principals (and in making sure principals enact the objectives) and those who perform this policy work in ways that are compatible with local school interests and supportive of principals' work in local enactment.

3. *Helping and hindering:* many fulsome positive descriptions of principal relationships with their ED, contrast sharply with some detailed negative observations about the ways in which the some EDs (and the ED role more generally) work to hinder, obstruct and diminish principals' work. While often pegged to an ED's lack of knowledge and understanding of the local context and circumstances of the individual principal and their school, these negative comments also provide insights into what principals consider unhelpful ED practices, such as conducting one-sided conversations, using coercive techniques such as persuasion and manipulating their interactions with principals to fit their own career objectives.

   Attached to conversations about whether the ED helps or hinders, is an empathetic insight that many principals have into the difficulty of the ED role. Generally built on a 'meat in the sandwich' representation of an ED caught between the differing needs and wishes of the system and schools, these insights also run to the complexity of managing many and varied sites and principals, excessive travel (especially for those in rural and remote locations), unfairly high expectations and overly wide-ranging responsibilities.

4. *Power over careers:* the ways in which principals relate to their line manger appear to be mediated and shaped by the power EDs have over principals' careers – for example, power to adjudicate on their position, to approve or deny re-appoint and to referee positively or negatively. Eliciting a range of risk-averse responses, this power appears to course through many principal-ED relationships and underpin the necessity of acts of principal compliance, self-aggrandisement, and performativity. The career concerns of principals are covered more comprehensively in the sub-theme *Managing risk* later in this section.

Many observations of EDs made by interviewees extended to comments about the effectiveness of Local Education Teams (or LET teams). Again, characterised by the variation in responses about quality, effectiveness and relevance, the LET team structure is seen as a potentially useful adjunct and support for the instructional leadership work of principals, with the practical realisation of its potential highly reliant on the knowledge, collegiality and availability of its members.

> *I've got a very supportive ED and a very supportive LET team. (i22)*
>
> *I think the role of the education director, as an experienced principal, is somewhat skewed to an accountability person. (i40)*
>
> *There doesn't seem to necessarily be a level of consistency across patches, or Portfolios, depending on how the Education Director and their team operates and the level of skill that they've got within that team. (i20)*
>
> *I was in absolute shock. I didn't get my tenure back … He [the ED] said from day one, he didn't think a principal should ever have three terms … and he just pushed the panel to not have me. (i47)*
>
> *We are very civil with each other, but I actually see them as an extraordinary barrier between leaders and the system … I see Education Directors as being the buffer between the critical information about transformation and the leaders … in a negative way. They would not have a job if there was no buffer. (i38)*
>
> *My ED is pretty supportive, though. So being able to use her as that sounding board when things are a little bit murky is pretty valuable. (i48)*
>
> *[W]hen we're all friends it's fine [but] when things get tricky then there is direct, absolutely direct pressure. (i43)*
>
> *To be absolutely honest, they [the EDs] did what they had to do. All they're interested in is data to make them look good. Nothing beyond that is a feature of their world. (i49)*
>
> *I am confident and comfortable that if I have an issue to go to her with it, so I think it's that open communication, that mutual respect. I think it's important that she knows the school … she not only knows the school, but she knows small schools or she knows rural regional schools. (i26)*

***System-led school improvement:*** Emblematic of the contrasting principal perspectives on working in and with the system are the reflections of participants on (i) past efforts to enact school improvement through centralised policy – variously characterised in interview as 'A World Class system by 2028' and the 'Good to Great initiative' – focussed on data-led literacy and numeracy improvement, and (ii) more recent developments that have caused a significant refocussing of system interest in school improvement [4].

In relevant interview data, a small group of principals describe their fondness for the focussed certainty and the across-school consistency of the 'Good to Great' agenda. This group appeared to enjoy the satisfaction and incentive of improved student outcome data and to find, in this initiative, new ways to secure their local leadership credibility, greater confidence in the alignment of their leadership with the interests of the broader system, and some licence to simplify and confine their local improvement objectives to those of the system.

> *I was quite happy with the old regime. Our staff here were quite motivated by that, because they knew they were doing good stuff in classrooms, and that the data was really good. And they were incentivised by that a bit and we celebrated that data as a staff. (i12)*
>
> *I was really happy with where the system was going around that focus on improving literacy and numeracy. And I feel what's come onboard, from someone who's worked in fairly tough schools, I found a little bit patronising. (i19)*

---

[4] Interviews for the IPP research project occurred soon after the release of the DfE policy document 'Our Strategy for Public Education in South Australia' and after many principal participants had attended, and run in their own schools, information and professional learning sessions about the new policy and its strategies.

Against this affection for the previous school improvement policy agenda, a much larger body of responses expressed: (i) disillusionment with the tenets, processes and outcomes of 'Good to Great', and (ii) enthusiasm for tying school improvement to more recent policy directions emerging from the 2023 document 'Our Strategy for Public Education in South Australia'. The effects of this shift on schools can be understood via some of the reactions captured in interview that follow.

> *Under [the previous CE], it was very much about your NAPLAN. You got your point score, and we were, as a world class education system, we were looking for a 5.8 or whatever. So then, you know, I'm sitting here as a 3.6 …. Don't repeat that. (i6)*
>
> *We've now got permission to slow down, we've got permission to put our local context at the forefront. We've got permission to put value on relationships in schools, whereas that hasn't necessarily always been the case. (i21)*
>
> *[The] change of system narrative is slowly creeping through. I think there's a lot of those EDs that are struggling with that because the corporate alignment piece is easier to manage. (i43)*
>
> *Our previous ED was very much, 'these are the goals of the department, and therefore they're your goals' and I've worked really hard to integrate them into the philosophy of the school. I'm finding it much better now, a much easier sell with our new strategic directions … those department directions are actually going to be much more easily incorporated into our school philosophy. (i11)*

While the IPP interview data captures a strong thread of support for the current regime's efforts to broaden and shift the emphases for school improvement, more cautionary observations work to offset a general mood of positive anticipation.

> *[W]e're in the change period at the moment so if we're not putting the value on NAPLAN data, what are we putting the value on? And what are we held accountable for? And how do we measure it? And that's probably still some of my questions from a system perspective. (i21)*
>
> *I think if the system is actually pursuing excellence, they need to define what that looks like, and really set some goals for us to aspire to rather than lofty theoretical things. (i16)*

## Sub-theme 2: Being accountable …. practicing autonomy

Two comments made by interviewees successfully and usefully connect the previous section on centralised policy for school improvement with principal accountability. One identifies 'the accountability iteration of education leadership' and notes that under previous DfE leadership 'it was all about measuring school improvement around NAPLAN data' (i38). The other observes the shift in central policy interest 'in recent times' and notes that 'we're not exactly changing tack, but there is suddenly a whole raft of new expectations that we will be required to comply with' (i19). Both comments speak to the expectation of principals that system-led reform will be accompanied by accountability measures. These comments work as a segue to a more expansive treatment of our research data that embraces the tools and technologies of accountability, its governing effects and its constitutive workings, and its relations with notions of principal autonomy. In the language of Practice Architecture Theory, this analysis is inclusive of the 'sayings' 'doings' and 'relatings' that describe principal accountability practice as well as the architectures that enable and constrain practice inside the duality of accountability and autonomy.

*Accountability:* principals in our study readily acknowledge the need for accountability. Here, 'the buck stops with me' refrain, already used in this report to illustrate principal primacy, indicates a willingness to be held accountable for a wide-ranging set of responsibilities. Interview participants explicate, in variously favourable and damming accounts, their experiences with external accountability tools and processes such as school improvement planning, mandated self-review and external review processes, performance development/line management and data-led school ratings and comparisons. Additionally, more nuanced threads run through this discussion. For example, a general consensus may be detectable in claims about being held more accountable for school outcomes, but this is mediated by comments about the emergence of flexible way of achieving these outcomes and of an apparent gap in the accountability regime between the rhetoric and reality of consequences. One interviewee notes the absence of any 'real' accountability, saying that 'It's theoretical … nothing happens' (i16).

> *The buck stops with us with everything, whether it's worker safety, staffing, schooling, money, buildings, whatever. And you have to be prepared for that commitment to know that … your accountability is around that. (i24)*
>
> *I think if the schools going down, the principal is held to account. And I think that's fair, as well. (i25)*
>
> *Obviously, we need to be accountable. We need to document our progress and our outcomes, absolutely. But I just don't think it's authentic. It's compliance to keep the LET happy and that's not my job. (i45)*
>
> *I've never felt like this before, the pressures and the immediacy around reporting and justification of what we do … and I can't see it changing, it's more about our accountability … the pressure comes from the system demanding accountability. (i3)*
>
> *I don't feel particularly pressured by the external accountability. I think I certainly answer to my ED and we do a really good PDP process in our Portfolio with her and … she's the conduit between central office and us. (i19)*

While these observations of accountability make explicit links to the shaping of principal practices by systemic interventions, several participants comment on the power the community in holding schools and principals accountable.

> *And I'll be held to account by parents because of our NAPLAN results, and because of the kids' grades, and all that kind of stuff. (i40)*
>
> *[T]here's also the view of the local community about the school too. And to me that's actually closer to my heart. I want this community to feel proud of our school, and to be confident that students who come here are going to be set up to flourish. (i23)*

Many references to principals as agents of accountability, illustrate how accountability permeates their other responsibilities in what might be termed *accountability ecologies*. As testimony to the ecology of practice (see Appendix A), accountability is variously linked to: (i) principals making sure staff hold to the requirements of whole-school, shared agreements, (ii) to enacting equity and social justice goals by holding teachers to account 'for meeting the needs of the diverse range of students' (i23), and (iii) by adopting a more rigorous focus on accountability in order to both inform and avoid the formal process of managing underperformance.

***Autonomy:*** framed by its relations with accountability, principal autonomy appears in interview data as a qualified and elusive aspiration, often dwarfed by the need to comply. This does not mean that principals have given up on their freedoms, but rather that they find them in individual practices they fashion within the broader milieu of policy demands, formal responsibilities and tight management controls.

> *We used to have the autonomy … the permission to do what our school needed and personalise it to our needs. (i2)*
>
> *[W]e talk about school autonomy and principals having the autonomy to make their own decisions. But then we are constantly being challenged on some of these things. (i27)*
>
> *I think it's site autonomy, but within some agreed parameters. (i16)*
>
> *I feel I currently have a lot more autonomy. Probably more so since the last CE left, because the stick of data isn't as strong. (i15)*
>
> *Where we can create opportunities to have fun, your work is always going to be more satisfying. So where do we build the opportunities for collegial creativity, innovation through the lens of fun, that we know further down the track might lead us to something? I'd like to see an opportunity to be more in a play space that doesn't have accountability attached to it, or responsibility attached to it. Because that's what we do with our young people. (i29)*

In a relevant observation in the literature, De Lissovoy (2018) describes an 'anxious autonomy' that is 'built from individualised decision points' rather than on the freedom of the individual (p. 198). Along these lines, principals in our study allude to various techniques for fashioning conditional freedoms. Most prevalent, but rarely linked explicitly to freedom, are principal practices focused on local needs and enacted in spaces away from outside interference. A multiplicity of principal practices described in interview (and cited throughout this report), appear to fall into this category, including those related to personalising and contextualising student learning, community engagement and involvement, and linking with local learning, vocational and support opportunities.

Other less visible, and arguably more surreptitious, spaces of principal autonomy can be read from: (i) the aforementioned 'policy work' of principals and descriptions of practices that 'filter, 'interpret' or 'find some way to wriggle around' (i30) centralised policy so that principals are afforded some freedom to shape policy to local needs, and (ii) from references to outside networks and alliances that speak about the freedoms they afford principal members, for example, in the sharing of issues and challenges, in providing non-judgemental support and feedback and in engaging feely in conversations that would be difficult to conduct with in-school colleagues.

The transition points from De Lissovoy's (2018) 'anxious autonomy' to what he terms 'an enlivened agency' are not easily detected in IPP interview data. In quantitative data analysis, more direct references can be found in principal responses to a question that asks them to nominate up to six practices they consider important for helping with everyday manageability of the principal role (survey Question 23). Two of the options that are well supported are:

- *the desire to give principals more autonomy in making decisions about their schools* (chosen 91 times), and
- *giving principals more agency in planning and leading change in their schools (82 times).*

The full set of responses to Question 23 are shown in Figure 26, as part of discussion in Section 5.

While these observations do not provide a strong evidence base, OECD (2020) references drawn from analysis of data in their TALIS survey underline more emphatically the importance of school leader autonomy. As such, they provide a useful segue to a more expansive treatment of autonomy in response to the question 'how can the role of the principal be reconceptualised?' in Section 5 of this report. OECD (2020) claim that whether 'professionalism can flourish' depends on the autonomy school leaders have to 'enjoy in their daily work to make decisions, apply expert judgement, and to inform policy development at all levels of the system' (p. 26). Later the same report notes that when school leaders 'do not have significant authority over a majority of the tasks related to staffing, budget, school policies, and curriculum and instructional policies [this] seriously inhibits their ability to enact leadership' (p. 51).

## Overarching theme: Principal wellbeing

The wellbeing of principals is the subject of great interest amongst educational researchers interested in school leadership (see, for example, Niesche et al., 2023; Beausaert et al. 2023; Fosco, 2022). Perhaps the most prominent research project in the Australian setting is the *Australian Principal Occupational, Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey*. This longitudinal study, jointly conducted by researchers at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) and Deakin University, monitors school leaders' health and wellbeing on an annual basis. As such, it provides extensive information about ongoing and emerging pressures and challenges in school leadership. In the South Australian context, *Teachers at breaking point* (Windle et al. 2022) focusses mainly on teachers' working conditions and the link between increased demands and teacher wellbeing. However, when data analyses separate principals from teachers, a range of insights can be gleaned about:

- principal stressors, including excessive and competing demands for change, too many government initiatives, administrative workload and maintaining school discipline; and

- principal wellbeing and its imbrication with workplace satisfaction, including the finding from data analysis that only 'one in ten principals strongly agreed that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages of their profession' (p. 32).

These studies provide useful support and multiple departure points for the analysis of data and reporting of findings in IPP. The segue they provide, under the overarching theme of *Principal wellbeing*, is most obvious in the first sub-theme, *Stresses, anxieties and vulnerabilities.* The other sub-themes, *Managing risk* and *A satisfying job,* work into new spaces to highlight more hopeful possibilities in current practice and to foreshadow ideas for change and reform.

### Sub-theme 1: Stresses anxieties and vulnerabilities

To story data from interview about the stresses, anxieties and vulnerabilities that principals experience, workload contours already mapped out in themes of competing responsibilities, work intensification and workload management act as a backdrop to specific factors that interviewees identify as affecting their health and wellbeing. Imagery of individual markers on a broader canvas of principal workload is illustrated in the following comments:

> *It's a big job, you're accountable for a lot of things. You've got to go in with your eyes open. I'm not complaining about the level of responsibility, but I think the level of personal risk now is increasing. And I do think that I'm hearing that from other principals too … that we are feeling quite vulnerable. (i23)*
>
> *[C]ould I do this job for another 20 years? I don't think I could because it is all-consuming. You live and breathe it, it's a lifestyle. And you wake up in the middle of the night, and your mind's racing about all the things that are happening at the school (i35)*
>
> *I leave home at 6:30 in the morning, and I don't get home until 7:00 sometimes. And then I'll spend some of the weekend working. So, I think the, the actual volume of work has a direct impact on my well-being. (i46)*

In interview, participating principals connect various specific factors affecting their practice to elevated levels of stress, anxiety and vulnerability. Given the detailed and lengthy coverage of these factors, they are here presented summarily in the chart, Figure 19. Each identified factor is briefly elaborated using principal practices cited in interview and then further illustrated using various principal perspectives (via interview excerpts).

*Critical Incident Reporting and follow up, the dotting of the I's, the crossing of the T's - you really can't set a foot wrong with your response. Whether it's bullying, assaults or a weapon at school … complaints from parents, students with disability - there's an array of those things out there, which I'm hyper-aware of and that keep me awake at night. (i23)*

*Working with the community is really challenging, particularly with parents who don't want to work with you as a school … and so you end up having really challenging conversations with quite aggressive and angry parents, and you wear the burden of that. I try and take most of those complex parents rather than my leaders doing it. (i35)*

*The notion of school as a centre of learning has shifted to a place where the whole child needs to be nurtured … I've never had as many suicide attempts, self-harms, high risk behaviours, sexual abuse. I've got more in that filing cabinet than I had in 25 years previously. 75 per cent of my budget goes into student support – that's behaviour support and mental health. (i17)*

**Critical incidents**
- managing wide range of incidents
- following up with paperwork / meeting DfE requirements
- mitigating effects of technology / media / social media

**Vexatious parents**
- dealing with parent anger and agression
- responding to threats
- being constantly available and accessible
- changing attitudes and behaviours

**School / student complexity**
- recognising emerging complexities
- aligning resourcing to student needs
- building relevant skills and dispositions in staff and students

**Factors affecting principal stress, anxiety and vulnerability - a focus on practice**

**Student behaviour**
- establishing consistent expecations
- supporting teachers in classrooms
- following up with families / DfE
- making and enacting policy

**Data management**
- meeting external requirements for data collection and sharing
- evaluating efficacy / use of available data
- contextualising data to local needs

**(De) professionalisation**
- dealing with negative depictions of schools and educators
- enhancing professional repuation in the community
- building knowledge and expertise

**Supporting staff wellbeing**
- paying attention to wellbeing issues
- managing staff workloads
- counselling and mentoring at-risk staff

*It's having the skills to be able to support teachers in behaviour management. Modeling what I might do with kids, putting those practices in place and making sure our policies are consistent … So how can we best work with that so all students can be at school and feel safe at school. (i34)*

*[In the past] there was a much higher standing in the community for the principal, and respect for their positional authority rather than the person themselves. (i11)*
*[Now] there's a level of disrespect that we see from the media and from parents, and I'm now seeing it from students. (i10)*

*Wellbeing is so important, and I look at ways I can support my staff all the time. I'm very mindful of how their role, their work has changed. But I feel that I put more on myself as a result … I talk to other colleagues, it's the documentation, the paperwork, and the emails. It's relentless. (i13)*

*What data aren't we providing … Surely there's another way that we could do that system-wide, that makes it easier for sites … There is [also] a behind the scenes analysis that I think could be taken from us. That then enables us to move into what are we are actually going to do about it. (i29)*

Complementing the insights in Figure 19, the graph in Figure 20 summarises how survey respondents rated the sources of stress in their work. The recurring theme of too much administrative work, is here joined with other prominent perspectives from qualitative data analysis, including:

- building capacity and resources to better cater for student complexity and diversity

- addressing parent concerns and dealing with vexatious parents

- managing the constant demands of student behaviour management

- Satisfying the system's accountability and reporting requirements.
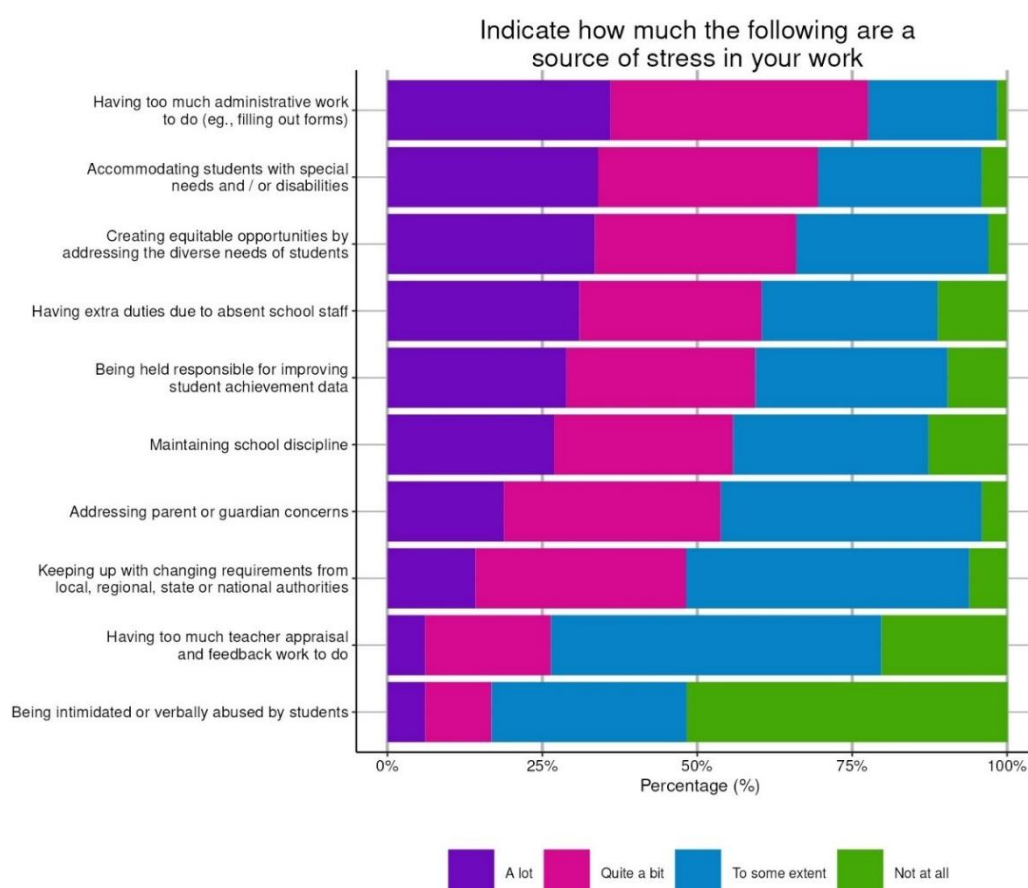


*Figure 20: Summary of sources of stress in survey respondents' work*

Associated with the practice of *maintaining school discipline* in Figure 20*,* Hypothesis 3 tests the connection between this principal practice and levels of disadvantage.

Hypothesis 3: Principals in schools with a lower Index of Disadvantage rated maintaining school discipline as a greater source of stress than their counterparts in more advantaged settings.

The graph, Figure 21 shows the results of a cross-analysis of the relationship between the Index of Disadvantage of respondents' schools and the principal practice *maintaining school discipline* (calculated as a percentage of each response type in each category of disadvantage and then

aggregated into three combined categories). The hypothesis in supported by the data, with the pattern of responses in each of the combined categories suggesting that *maintaining school discipline* is a greater cause of stress for principals in schools with lower indexes of disadvantage. Besides its descriptive function, this cross tabulation illustrates the importance of contextual variables – in this case SES level – and suggests the need to be continually alert to the dangers of generalisation in data analysis and, concomitantly, to pay attention the heterogeneity of schools and principals in the DfE system.
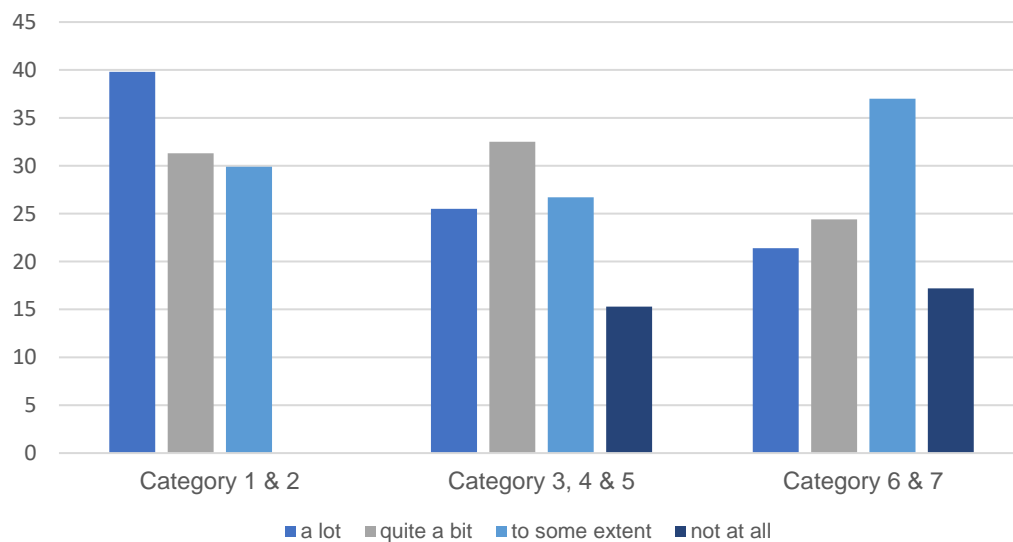


*Figure 21: Relationship between index of disadvantage and maintaining school discipline*

## Sub-theme 2: Managing risks

In the qualitative component of IPP, the formal and procedural processes of risk management and risk mitigation do not feature in responses of principal participants. However, some interviewees describe the bracing and productive aspects of risk-taking gained, for example, through curriculum and technology innovation, local partnership initiatives and high stakes conversations. Other interviewees describe the dangers – real or perceived – they face in a range of practices, processes and relationships. Some of this ground has already been covered in at times oblique references to threats inherent in handling vexatious parents and critical incidents, in dealing with an increasingly complex student cohort and in managing an expanding and unpredictable workload.

This balancing of positive and negative perceptions of risk plays out in various data. One interviewee describes 'the quality of being a courageous leader' as 'one that cannot only make the decisions but is a risk-taker [and] wants to seek new challenges' (i13). Another claims that 'if you take no risks, you will never actually venture into new territory, you'll never have the wonder of doing something that has not been done before' (i17).

Despite these positive assertions, an appetite for risky leadership receives scant attention in descriptions of practice. On the other hand, an aversion to risk is a prominent feature. For this sub-theme, *risk aversion* is taken as threaded through many aspects of principal practice and connected in multiple ways with principal wellbeing and job satisfaction.



We try to actually look at the multiple needs and have a plan that articulates how we're going to address all of these needs. And so our change management has improved dramatically. You have to build the plane as you're flying it. And sometimes in doing that, you kind of forget a couple of screws and then you come unstuck. (i16)



I imagine myself floating on a beautifully, slimline kayak, and then I hit some rapids, and the rapids turn me in multiple different directions. And occasionally, I'm grasping at the boulders that sit alongside the banks, that can take me to safety. And occasionally, they throw me right back into the turbulence. And I find my way, redirecting and re-navigating always in in rapids … this this chaos of education [and] it's probably where I find myself in my leadership. (i29)
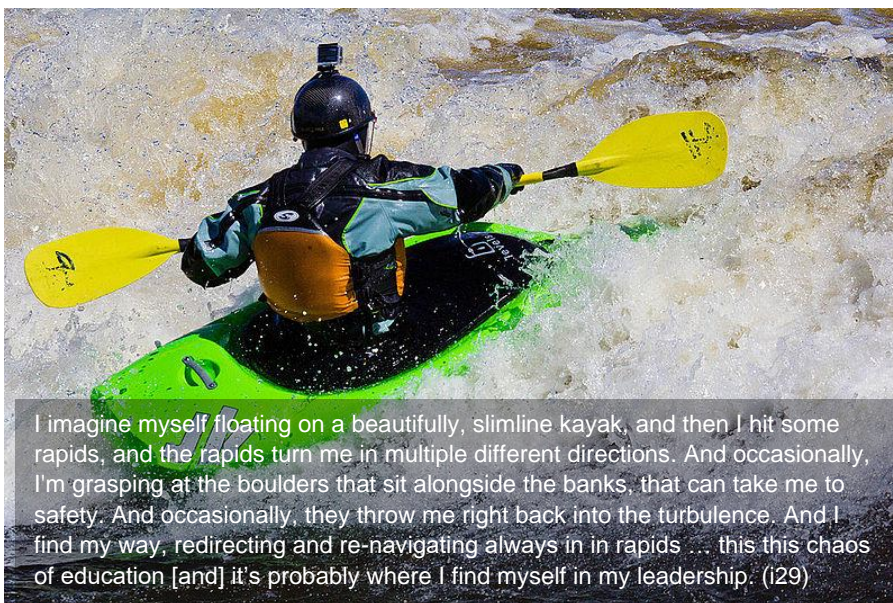
> *If you take risks and things don't go so well, it's not good for your wellbeing. We don't have that person who will say, 'It's okay' – that trust and connection is missing. (i50)*
>
> *We've got a school that is fraught with OHS things. We've tightened it up as much as we can. But that causes me sleepless nights I've gotten to the stage now where I've become overcautious to the point … to the detriment of student experiences. But you can't afford not to be. (i30)*

A focus on risk aversion, including the apparent reluctance of principals to embrace risk, invites analysis of two yet-to-be explored areas of principal practice, *Reputational risks* and *Career risks.*

*Reputational risks*

Risks to reputation appear prevalent at the level of both school and personal/professional reputation. Reputational risks are less quantifiable and predictable than those which have been managed and minimised over time, such as risks of student injury, concerns about unsafe buildings and facilities, or the possible dangers of camps and excursions. Nevertheless, many of the individual risks cited by interviewees in our study – such as those associated with child protection, negative media coverage, workplace health and safety, and employee relations – do appear to fold into the broader field of reputational risk. Szwaja (2018) makes the relevant observation that for those charged with reputation management these other types of risks 'contain a reputation risk element' often with effects 'much more serious in the long term than those directly caused by the event itself' (p. 167). From the reputational concerns expressed in interview, three key agents of risk emerge:

***The media:*** the media, including social media, appear to evoke defensive principal responses based largely on the damage that might be caused to reputation by negative depictions and sensationalised stories. The literature connecting 'mediatized events' with reputation is instructive in claims that such events wrest control of the school narrative away from school leaders (see Power et al. 2009), create feelings of powerlessness and fragility amongst 'reputation bearers' (Eisenegger, 2009, p. 15) and amplify risks in ways that that feed a 'growing concern or even outrage among the public' (Vasterman, 2018, p. 23).

Adding to the potential risks to reputation from broadcast media, the literature provides insights into risk amplification, diversification and proliferation brought on by social media (see, for example, Doyle, 2007; Vasterman, 2018; Aula, 2010). However, participants in our interview study make only veiled references to the riskier aspect of social media, with several pointing to practices that look to harness its power for improved communication and promotion.

> *When something happens, the media's here instantly … So you know, [our school] is high profile, and you become very attuned to that high level of risk. (i17)*
>
> *And there are so many ways that schools and principals get put into the public domain where people are critical, whether you're on the front page of the Advertiser or in the local press. (i23)*
>
> *[S]ocial media is one of the ways that we try and work with the community. We've had some very positive and some very negative experiences from our local press … it is almost shock journalism. (i3)*

***Marketisation:*** Marketisation of schooling and competition between schools creates the necessity for principals to hold and defend a place in the school market. Data from our interview study shows that principals must be alert to the possibilities for publicising and promoting their site and themselves, while remaining vigilant in minimising risks to reputation that might have damaging effects on student

enrolments, school-of-choice status and their personal credibility and professional persona. Interviewees represent the risks in a marketised environment largely through the challenge of maintaining viable enrolments and the threat to viability posed by other school systems.

> *I'm trying very hard to promote my school through any positive avenue that I can. The system does not encourage comparing or promoting your data sets … to some extent, it actively discourages you from doing so – 'This is public education and we're not in competition with each other'. The reality is we are. (i16)*
>
> *I think a bit of competition between schools is actually quite healthy, not to the detriment of public education and its values, but just to keep us honest. (i14)*
>
> *We compete, that's the only way I can put it …. we are competing with the private sector. We have a 20-hour SSO1 public relations manager… it's about our image. (i6)*
>
> *So, lots of kids are going to [the local Catholic school] from our school, I'd probably say that number has doubled, if not tripled over the last few years. (i1)*

Another prominent sentiment speaks directly to feelings amongst participants about the competition between schools in the public system.

> *There's also the competitiveness between government schools because you do have students whose families are choosing between them. (i23)*
>
> *We actually have agreements, we have a procedure that says, 'we have zoned schools, we have schools of right not schools of choice, blah, blah, blah', but it's not upheld, it's not. I can't force my neighbouring school to return my students to me … The ones that they don't want that they move on. We're the poor cousins in the system, and it hurts. (i33)*

***Data:*** As a subset of marketisation and promotion, data-led measures of school performance appear to carry potential risks to reputation for principals and schools. In interviews, datafication is most commonly linked to principal workload, and data is often read as a positive lever for improvement. Additionally, however, the relations of data and reputational risk can be detected in comments about data as a tool for increasing public and employer scrutiny of school performance, for adjudging principal performance and for shifting the attention of principals away from work that is, arguably, more important. From these observations, reputational risk categories can be discerned from possibilities for unfavourable comparisons and rankings, simplified outside judgements of quality and performance, and a lopsided emphasis on using data to show improvement.

> *I think the performance of our schools are now under public scrutiny. We are held accountable. There are all sorts of data collected that the department now uses to assess the performance of the school. (i23)*
>
> *Our ED stood up at a Partnership meeting and said, 'I'm going to have the conversation with everyone. I won't be extending any tenures in this Partnership, because the data says, you're not good enough … I'm under that level of pressure to get another job. (i49)*
>
> *A lot of work around the cultural aspects of things we've lost because we've been driven by data and outcomes for schools and our role's supposed to be to crack the whip over instructional leadership. (i14)*
>
> *The data has a place, but we've gone a little bit too business like … we seem to have gone a bit too far.* (i2)

*Career risks*

Career risks appear, from interview data, to evoke defensive and risk-averse reactions with often far-reaching consequences for principal performance, personal job satisfaction and political participation. Processes of accountability, compliance and self-promotion are readily connected by interviewees to practices that might enhance or reduce career prospects, promotion, rollover and job security. Other links to career risks can be detected in interviewee responses that (i) highlight an unwillingness to speak out about ill-fitting policy demands or to speak back to those who manage them and their work, (ii) express a preoccupation – willing or otherwise – with improving those data that are used to measure and compare school effectiveness; and (iii) describe appeasing community Governing Council voices, including those that divert the reform agenda the principal is trying to enact.

Bringing a career risk interpretive to earlier discussion of the *principal: ED relationship*, and specifically

> *I do think job security is going to be really important moving forward. Talking to earlier career principals, they're really frightened that if they don't do the right thing, they won't get their jobs back … [and that] someone's perception of you is more important than the reality of what you're actually doing. (i45)*
>
> *I know that when people were applying for jobs, they had to prove that their school had done well … that has become a factor within the employment process. (i18)*
>
> *[W]e are vulnerable, we are completely vulnerable. And if things go guts up, we will be burned personally without doubt, without hesitation in the machine. We will not stop it, it will steamroll us, throw us to the lions as an individual and keep moving. They do not care. (i43)*
>
> *But I know that amongst my colleagues, their innovation, their creativity, the things that they could do, are really stifled by feeling that it could be career threatening or career limiting. (i39)*

to the significant influence that EDs have in principal selection processes, reveals a strong set of sentiments amongst interview participants in our study. Shown below in excerpts from interview, these sentiments make the most direct references to career risk in our study. These data go to the constitutive power of the ED position and to a source of unease in some Principal/ED relationships.

> *My ED comes for a site visit … and he's counting down how many terms I've got left of my tenure. 'That's how many terms you've got left [before] I decide if I roll you over'. I just think that's powerplay stuff. (i45)*
>
> *With leaders who want to come in and maybe want to challenge and be provocateurs … you can't be challenging the person who is going to reappoint you or not. (i38)*
>
> *Accountability unfortunately manifests itself in 'you do what your ED tells you or you don't have a job' … put in simple terms, that's pretty much what goes. Your future is determined by a discussion around a coffee machine at an ED meeting. The notion of merit selection I think is a little bit wayward. (i14)*
>
> *If we could find a way of [principals] being line managed without feeling that they can't do the things they want to do because they won't get their jobs back … one of the things I've wondered about is whether principals should be appointed by a kind of independent body with the ED having an important say in it, but not being the key person that reappoints principals. (i39)*

## Sub-theme 3: A satisfying job

The overarching themes and sub-themes in this section illustrate the broad expanse of the job satisfaction umbrella. Under the arch of wellbeing, this final sub-theme is permeated by three productive lines of discussion in our research, extracted and distilled from the many references participants make to the principalship as a satisfying job.

Firstly, many principals refer to their love of the job, and to the passion they bring and the commitment they have made to the principal position. Working partly as a corrective to the unsatisfying qualities picked out in the workload issues, stressors and risks so far discussed, these more optimistic responses work to affirm the positive aspects of the role as outweighing the negative. In pointing to specific causes of satisfaction, they suggest that improved job satisfaction is not always directly connected to easing the burden of work complexity and workload management.

> *I actually love my job. And I feel quite blessed … There's never a day that I don't want to go to work. (i15)*
>
> *Recognising we've all got lives outside of school, but I love it too. I love the challenge. I love the people that I work with. I love looking for what's next … I just thrive on that challenge. (i13)*
>
> *I absolutely love the job. I don't feel like I go to work any day I'm hugely passionate … I think it's that servant nature – I'm here to help others. (i28)*

A second line of discussion, as a follow-on from the talk of bringing love, passion and commitment to the principalship, takes the concept of job satisfaction as functioning, at least in part, as an antidote to simplified solutions to reducing the principal workload that are based only on taking tasks away or distributing responsibilities. While data in our study suggests that these strategies remain in play, the pursuit of a more satisfying job is, for many participants in our study, a more complex equation.

> *If I'm not busy and if my workload is not high, I reckon my wellbeing would be affected more … what I'm seeing in terms of improvement just drives me even harder. And I actually think that if I wasn't improving the site, my wellbeing may well be directly affected, but I see the value in what I do. (i14)*



The river gum … they are the most majestic of flora. But they also survive. They survive in really, really tough conditions. I find the whole notion of leadership is that it's not some beautiful flower that emerges. You're actually thriving, but you're thriving under really significant challenges. (i10)
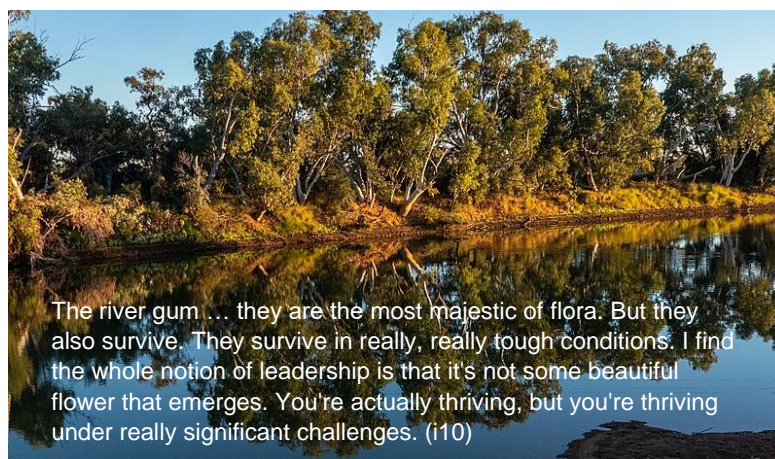
Finally, shifting to theoretical possibilities, the pursuit of a more satisfying job appears, in the complexity of its componentry, to offer a useful and productive frame for reconceptualising the role of principals. Already discussed factors affecting principal job satisfaction not only offer a grid on which reconceptualisation can be plotted but also various new trajectories and lines of flight to inform future thinking, planning and policy. These possibilities are illustrated by example in OECD (2020) where links are made between job satisfaction and 'the attractiveness of school leader roles'. An array of contributing factors including working conditions, opportunities for professional learning and growth, social status, professional autonomy, financial reward and intellectual satisfaction are shown

to contribute to an attractiveness that 'is crucial to the sustainability of education systems' (OECD, 2020, p. 54).

Working from quantitative data, Figure 22 depicts responses to a question which asked principals to say how they felt about various aspects of their job. The obvious tendency to positive responses to the first six aspects shown in the graph – with each drawing more than 80% of responses in the 'strongly agree' and 'agree' categories – provides strong support to claims of high levels of affection for the job made in qualitative analysis. Additionally, for those aspects described in the negative (e.g., *I regret that I decided to become a principal* and *I wonder whether it would have been better to choose another profession*) there were low levels of agreement amongst respondents.

Against this pattern of elevated levels of personal regard for the job, the assertion that *I think that the education profession is valued in society* receives low levels of support (with less than 3% of respondents saying they 'strongly agree'). Whether or not society's professional regard for principals is in decline is a question that has not been fully addressed in this research. Nevertheless, given its close association with matters of job satisfaction and wellbeing, principal professionalism surfaces as an important organiser of some of the ideas about role reconceptualisation in Section 5.
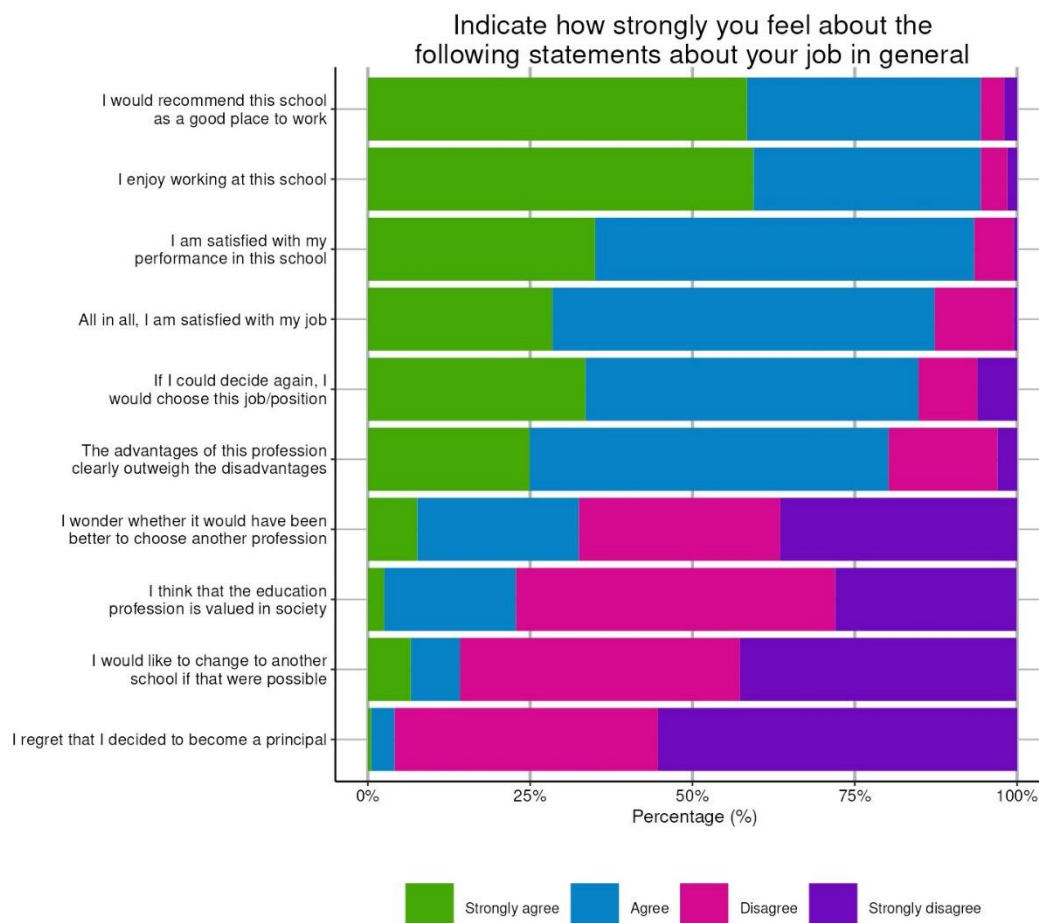


*Figure 22: How principals generally feel about their job*

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## 5. How can the role of principal be reconceptualized?

This final data analysis section of the report continues to rely on qualitative and quantitative data collected in IPP. However, as a response to an open-ended question and with an orientation to the future, this section necessarily entails a shift to some more speculative realms. As such, it moves from research-informed interrogation of the pragmatics of the current role and the possible changes they suggest, towards some possibilities in new theory and practice and, finally, to less methodical and more imaginative reforms in areas that our research data have revealed and often rendered as contestable or underdone – such as principal autonomy, principal voice and principal agency.

### Overarching theme: Shifting the load

To map the terrain of the overarching theme *Shifting the load*, it is instructive to lead with some analysis of quantitative data based on responses to two questions in the survey about reconceptualisation of the principal role. Figure 23 summarises responses to the following:

*Question 22:  To support thinking about how the role of principal might be reconceptualised, use the following scale to describe the practices that you would like to be spending more time on and those you'd like to be spending less time on in your current principal role.*

*Figure 23: Survey respondents' Ideal use of time*
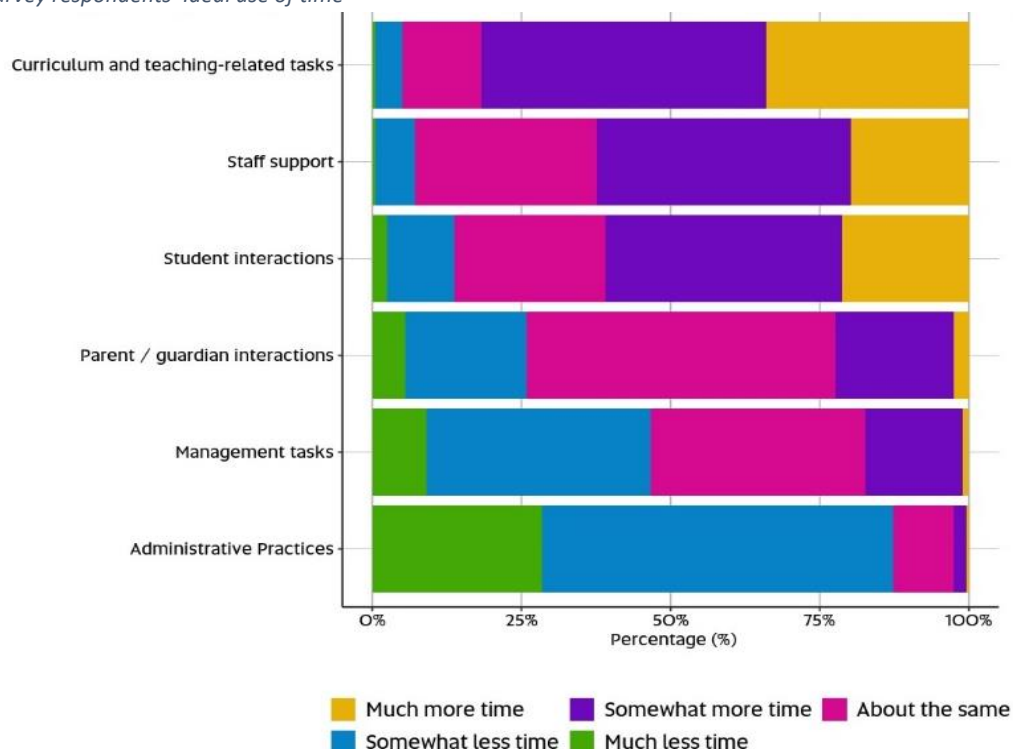


The graph, Figure 23, reaffirms claims made in interview that principals, in a reconceptualising of their role, would favour devoting additional time to *curriculum and teaching related tasks* (with 161/85% of respondents wanting 'somewhat more time' or 'much more time'), *staff support* (123/65%) and

*student interactions* (120/62%). By contrast – and in accordance with responses to other survey questions and a strong line of argument in interview data – respondents favour spending 'somewhat less time' or 'much less time' on *administrative practices* (172/91%) and *management tasks* (92/47%).

Figure 24 shows the distribution of survey responses to the following:

*Question 23: Each of the following perspectives on reconceptualising the role of principal is based on ideas provided by principal participants in the qualitative part of this project.*

*We would like to know which of these perspectives you think are important for stakeholders (such as principals, leader networks and associations, and policy makers) to consider in the future.*

*From the list, select 6 perspectives that you consider important for helping with the everyday manageability of the principal role.*

*Removing unnecessary administrative and managerial tasks from the role* is the most commonly chosen response (142/72%), with related options, *providing more flexible options for principals in human resource management, including recruitment, retention and staff performance* (123/62%) and *reducing external accountabilities imposed on principals and their schools* (108/53%) also amongst most frequent chosen options. Other popular responses shift attention away from reducing the tasks and responsibilities of principals and towards thinking about reconceptualisation in terms of key themes emerging in the qualitative component of IPP such as distributed leadership, relational trust, principal autonomy and agency, and principal leadership of teaching and learning.

These brief descriptions drawn from Figures 23 and 24 are usefully supplemented by long-hand responses provided in response to the final (optional) question *Do you have any further suggestions for reconceptualising the role of the principal?* Indicative of the level of interest in this topic, 65 respondents provided additional comments (see Appendix D). Taken together, these quantitative data help map a broad canvas of considerations about how the role of principal might be reconceptualized. They also shift attention away from the descriptive analysis of issues and concerns that characterised Section 4 of this report and towards data analysis and discussion founded on possible solutions, productive change and imaginative new ideas.

Exploiting the expansive quality of mixed-methods research, three factors impacting the workload of principals are now extracted from both qualitative and quantitative data and positioned as sub-themes under the arch of *Shifting the load*. As they largely re-interpret ideas already discussed in the report, they are dealt with briefly in this section as factors that feed possibilities for reconceptualising the principal role and thus work as a segue to the next overarching theme, *Restructuring and Redefining the Role.*

*Figure 24: Survey respondents' perspectives on everyday manageability of the principal role*

Distribution of perspectives principals think are important for helping
with the everyday manageability of the principal role
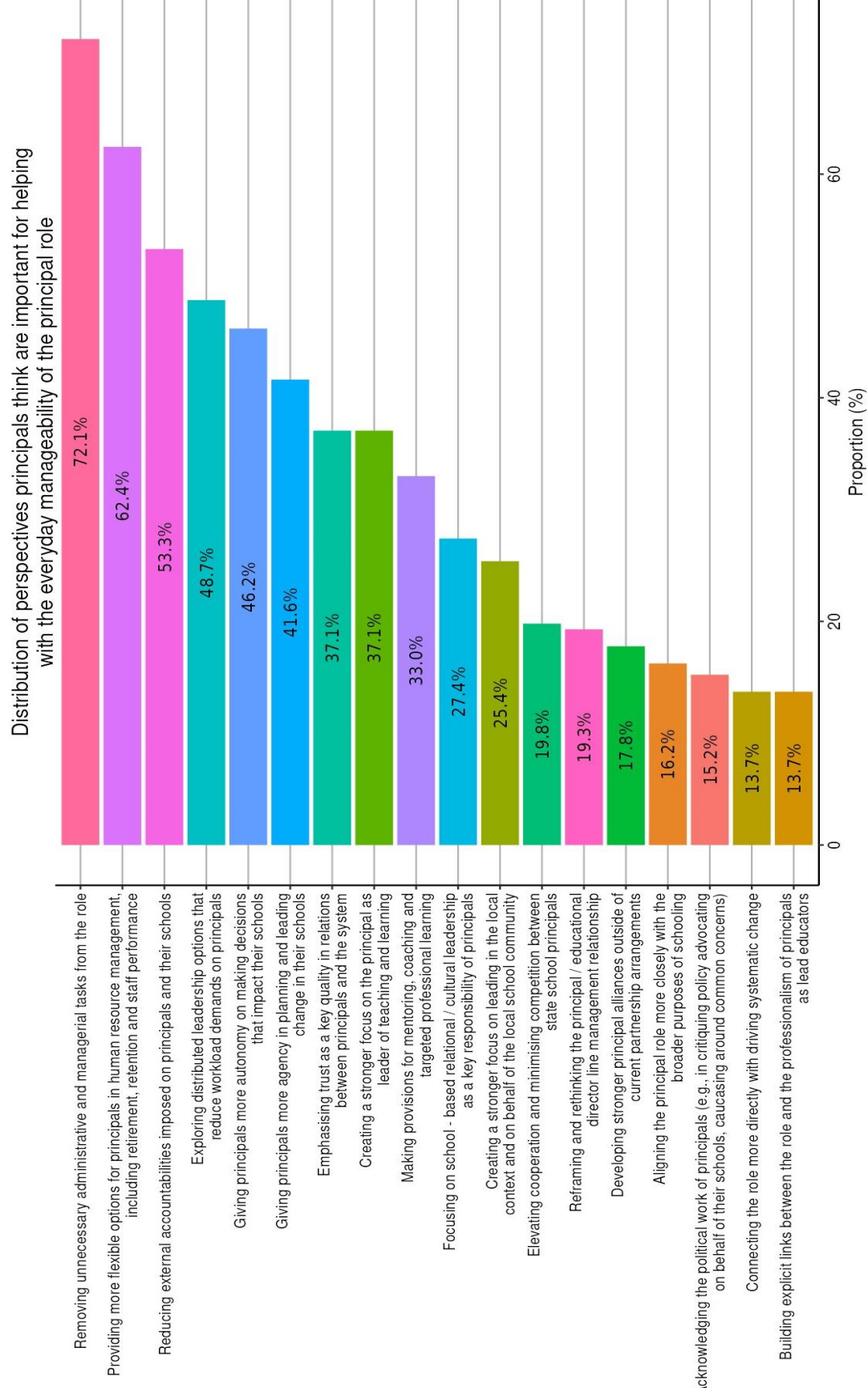
## Sub-theme 1: Rationalising administrative responsibilities

Much has already been made of the weight of administrative work in the principal role. Both qualitative interview data and quantitative survey data have conveyed a clear picture of an administrative load that is heavy, considered to some extent unnecessary and that intrudes on other responsibilities that principals consider more important. Along these same lines, interview responses to questions about reconceptualisation were commonly founded on freeing up the principal from administrative and management duties to contemplate other versions of their work. Several strategies for achieving this objective, were formulated and enlarged by interviewees, including:

- ***Changing existing in-school roles and creating new roles that include administrative tasks and responsibilities currently held by principals.*** Several interviewees described local attempts to delegate parts of their administrative work. While some reported welcome reductions in their workload, others described challenges in up-skilling of staff, overloading of other leaders and putting pressure on other areas of work within the school. Several small school principals also derided the lack of staffing flexibility available to them and, relatedly, argued that their administrative responsibilities were broader than those of principals in larger schools.

> *I've created an HR Manager role … She's doing a lot of that administrative paperwork. But it's a new role this year so she's still learning. Next year, hopefully, that will take a bit more pressure off. (i27)*
>
> *There is still a lot of administrative things I need to do. I've got a PA that does some, but then I've got to share her with other things and her level of skill and accountability is nowhere near high enough. (i23)*

- ***Elevating the Business Manger role.*** As an extension of the above strategy, interviewees paid special attention to the Business Manager role. One interviewee captured the importance of this strategy when they observed, in reference to the Business Manager position, that 'redefining the role of the principal is actually more about redefining some of those other roles that sit in schools, and having commensurate levels attached to those' (i33). While data from the IPP study shows the interest of principals have in pursuing this strategy, references made by interviewees to difficulties in funding a higher-level position, limitations of school size, insufficient skill levels and lack of preparedness for higher responsibility signal significant complexities in implementation.

> *The first role that they have to look at would have to be the Business Manager role. The majority of business managers are people who have low level finance training, maybe a Cert 3 in something … that's a piece of sheer nonsense when you're talking about this level of facility and budget management. They're expected to make decisions or provide advice to me, but they really have no training themselves. So it's the blind leading the blind. (i33)*
>
> *I think we need to get rid of business managers. That's just an untenable role … We need to have within school a chief financial officer and we need that person to actually manage your contracts, your finances and your building, and all of that hard stuff that doesn't really require relating nicely to leading a team of people. (i17)*
>
> *I know that the compliance stuff has to be done. It'd be great if we had a PA that did a lot of that. But we haven't got a business manager, we've got a finance person. She's an SSO 2 and that's not a particularly high level. (i18)*
>
> *I've given as much of that [infrastructure project management] to my business manager as I can, but she's not willing to make the hard and fast decisions, they come back to me to make … if you've got somebody that can meet you at that level and take over things like the finance, buildings, infrastructure, resourcing and maintenance … my principal role would better serve teaching and learning. (i30)*
>
> *I feel a lot of the admin work could be done by a business manager, but that's not possible in a small school, we don't have the ability to do that. (i7)*

***Centralising administrative tasks.*** General claims about moving some of the administrative work of principals to central office are supported in interview by some quite specific suggestions about tasks that might be better managed at system level. As part of the discussion of site and/or system responsibility for administration and management work, many principals also call for improvement in the various technologies, platforms and dashboards that interface with their work.

> *The administrative layer that sits with principals is something that I think could be almost eradicated. And I'd love to see more of that system wide. (i29)*
>
> *VSP as the platform to manage our HR does not work effectively and is very cumbersome and doesn't help with workload. (i35)*
>
> *I would prefer to be doing a whole lot less on facilities and finance, because I think a lot of that could be managed more centrally, particularly leave and pay and all those kinds of things … it's still seen that the principal knows everything about every type of leave, and everything. And it's just shouldn't be the case. (i25)*
>
> *Either the department needs to look at the administrative aspects to our job, and make them less onerous, and make them less time consuming or they need to think about how they can put in an administrator in to do that and work with the principal so the principal can go back to being student-centred, and as a leader of staff. (i32)*

## Sub-theme 2: Building instructional leadership capacity

Many participants in interview who claim they spend excessive time in administration and management make a direct link to the paucity of time left for them to lead teaching and learning. As one interviewee notes, 'if the department wants us to be strong instructional leaders, well then we need to do something about the administrative workload, because at the moment, there's too many tensions between them' (i18).

Hypothesis 4 was formulated to test this observation of tension between administration and instructional leadership using survey data:

> Hypothesis 4: Principals would prefer to spend less time on administrative practices in comparison to curriculum and teaching related tasks.

Figure 23, used in the introduction to this section, shows a comparison of responses to a survey question about principals' preferred use of their time. The graph shows that, for *administrative practices, including meetings, reports, budget, timetabling, responding to head/regional office requests and requirements,* respondents would prefer to be spending 'somewhat less time' or 'much less time' (172/91% of respondents). It also shows that respondents want to spend 'somewhat more time' or 'much more time' on *curriculum and teaching related tasks, including curriculum, teaching, classroom observations, data analysis, teacher professional development* (161/82%)*.* The hypothesis, according to these survey data, is strongly supported.

While earlier commentary pointed to some ambiguity in the responses of participants to the question 'Would you call yourself an instructional leader?' a significant majority of principals expressed a desire to be more effective, visible and knowledgeable in leading curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in their schools. The limitations of space do not allow for a full representation of perspectives from interviewees on this topic. However, the interests of reconceptualisation are here served by some selected observations from interviewees that focus on areas for action such as:

- Being knowledgeable

> *You need to understand, teaching and learning and be willing to learn more about it. (i6)*
>
> *I've learnt that the most important aspect of leadership is to be current, to read, to ask, to watch, to listen, it's just so important that you are always ready for the next thing. (i25)*

- Building teacher capacity

> *If I'm wanting to implement a practice, I have to be able to acknowledge the challenges that teachers have with delivering a particular methodology or whatever … it's about providing the tools for people to implement what you truly believe needs to happen to improve the learning conditions for our students. (i10)*
>
> *I'm very much about building capacity of my staff, and around making sure that they have best practices for what they're doing in their work, and having the tools to be able to teach … Let's look at the evidence. Let's look at the research. I guess I was lucky that I was bringing some knowledge and I can say that I've seen this in another place. 'This is how it works'. (i7)*

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- Leading change

> *I guess I am [the leader of teaching and learning] in terms of pedagogy. I'm the one that does the transforming tasks … workshops around critical and creative thinking and, and all of those high impact strategies around teaching. (i12)*
>
> *My staff all have to read. The only thing that I require of them during the holidays is to pick one book that they're going to read. We've got a selection that link with the work we're going to do next year, but I front load it. We have to be effective learners before we ask the kids to be effective learners. (i16)*

- Being visible in the classroom

> *I think that people want to see that as the principal, you're visible, you're current, you know what they're doing, and [you know] how to give purposeful, relevant feedback to them. (i25)*
>
> *It is just being present and visible and holding everyone to account for small things. And then I walk around if you want holding people to it. And that may mean sometimes having a difficult conversation in private with a staff member around them not following what we all agreed were going to do as non-negotiable, or sometimes just giving the thumbs up to someone. Either way is that kind of act of noticing and paying attention. (i16)*
>
> *I'm always in the classrooms. So I've always wandered around the classrooms. I'm very visible and approachable. So that's really important. I always put people first and paper second. (i42)*
>
> *I'm relatively young in teaching and I've still got that passion for teaching and learning. So I do a lot of classroom work, a lot of observations, a lot of leading other leaders. (i24)*

Figure 16 (used in the previous section to illustrate student complexity – see page 48) depicts how survey respondents understand the various factors that impact on their leadership of teaching and learning. As a tool of reconceptualisation, these data do not deal with whether or not principals should be instructional leaders, but instead provide telling insights into impediments that need to addressed if principals are to be effective in leading teaching and learning. Again, the various factors already linked to work intensification and workload management are prominent, with responses in the 'quite a lot' and 'a lot' categories being highest for factors such as time constraints, increase in students with special needs and greater complexity in the student cohort.

### Sub-theme 3: Modifying systemic demands

As already discussed, many interviewees dwell on systemic demands (e.g., associated with data, accountability and critical incidents) that they claim create an unreasonable workload. Through a reconceptualisation lens, the case for evaluating and possibly modifying each of these demands – as indicated in the interview excerpts below – is built around questions of purpose and need, reward for effort and unnecessary duplication. Looking across the range of systemic demands, several participants identify 'growth areas' that steepen and broaden the remit of principals, including managing more cumbersome and complex systems of human resource management, major onsite infrastructure projects, and the demands of new technology.

> There's some unnecessary duplication of work. Why are we are doing some of the things that we're doing? Annual reports, for example. Some of those system requirements need to actually be changed. (i13)
>
> The ICT support that exists in schools … the world is now in a whole different place in terms of technology, and we are not up to it. Our system hasn't caught up with that technological revolution. And so again, principals are supposed to manage that stuff. You're lucky if you know a bit about it. Otherwise, you're relying on an SSO3 telling you what to do. And you don't even know if they know what they're talking about. (i33)

A significant component of modification is to address inequities in the way various DfE systems apply (and are applied) to schools. The impossibility of adequately documenting such inequities is tied to the multiplicity of individual principal experiences at the interface of school needs and systemic responses. Working as a case study, the most clearly identifiable field of discontent in interview is the staffing process that forms a large part of principals' HRM responsibility.

In interview, expressions of frustrations with the staffing process are often accompanied by acknowledgement of a growing teacher shortage, references to a paucity of skilled teachers wanting to commit to the profession and issues with centralised HR systems and processes.

> [In HRM] there's been a mismatch for a long time between the department and what's happening on the ground. I don't know how many times I say the various processes and systems out there are not adequate they're not giving you a true reflection of who is available to teach in our state (i22).
>
> I think, in the current climate, if you've got two legs you'll get a job to be honest … people are running away from teaching, for sure, which is very concerning. (i24)
>
> Recruitment is hard … because we haven't been able to find people. So we've got a special authority to teach [a] fourth year here at the moment covering some primary need in PE because we just can't find anybody. (i26)
>
> You've got to go outside the rules, because HR will send you a list and often that means nothing. So I would meet with the unis, I'd go to Adelaide, I'd interview people. And I'd point out the benefits …. minimal behaviour, good teaching conditions and a supportive team that will have your back. We are very, very proactive … teacher shortages are starting to come to fruition. (i2)

Other staffing concerns relate to specific school contexts. For example, principals in disadvantaged settings are concerned that they are overlooked when prospective teachers are given the choice to go elsewhere. One interviewee from a low SES setting notes that 'the principal is really powerless in HR … (with) a staffing shortage across the system, staff can pick and choose where they want to go'

(i35). Another observes that 'we are not attractive. … I'm finding that really difficult … providing a vibrant, comprehensive educational experience for a broad range of students, I do not know that we'll be able to do it' (i5). Solutions to these staffing difficulties in disadvantaged schools generally relate to providing some incentive to prospective placements associated with more flexible tenure. One interviewee calls for a return of the now defunct 10-year tenure policy. Another suggests a change to system led HRM processes in order to restore 'some level of equity' for disadvantaged schools and goes on to identify the need for 'some sort of carrot … the flexibility to come across for a few years at a time for a stint rather than forever' (i15).

> *Trust your instincts and do your homework, get your referees and do your interview process. But because we don't have permanency to offer to get someone is near impossible (i22).*
>
> *When we're on the ground, and we can't get teachers for the following year, something's got to change (i18)*
>
> *Recruitment is hard. For the last two years, we haven't been able to get a science and maths teacher, which is why I'm picking up more teaching (i26)*
>
> *One of the biggest things would be HR … because it is about providing a wide curriculum in and out of the school setting. (i6).*
>
> *We fund the spilt classroom ourselves. So finance is definitely a challenge … to get consistency to have a teacher there year after year after year is a challenge. (i37)*

Another group of concerns are raised by area school and small school principals in rural and remote locations (see Appendix B). Typically accumulating around difficulties with recruitment and retention, interviewees highlight problems of resourcing, curriculum provision and capacity to attract specialist teachers.

Staffing, and HRM processes more generally, are a discrete area of the principal role where possibilities for reconceptualisation need to be formulated. While the many concerns and issues raised have workload implications and obvious connections to time wasting and stress, principals also point up other reasons for reform related to fairness and equity, inadequacy of systems and processes, and the varying impacts on attraction and retention of a growing teacher shortage. The solutions interviewees propose do not coalesce in a convincing blueprint. Rather, formulating the HRM work of principals in a reconceptualised role needs to be underpinned by a detailed evaluation of current processes, sharing and acknowledgement of informal and local practices of recruitment and retention and a strong principal voice in a wide-ranging consultation with relevant systems personnel.

## Overarching theme: Restructuring and redefining the role

In the qualitative component of IPP, principal interviewees unpacked the strengths and failings, the joys and disappointments, and the pressures and freedoms of their current role. However, most were more circumspect about the alternative configurations and changed priorities they favour in any future version. As a result, this overarching theme about restructuring and redefining the role builds largely from (i) themes already explored – specifically, using the lens of reconceptualisation to reveal a series of questions to be considered in discussions about changing the principal role, and (ii) supportive theory, literature and allied research that orients new ideas and perspectives to a broader conceptualisation.

### Sub-theme 1: Reviewing principal selection processes

This sub-theme, in going to matters of principal (re)selection, draws from the body of data summarised under *Managing risks* in the previous section. Rather than relying directly on limited ideas provided by principal interviewees about reviewing selection structures and processes, it takes the level of dissatisfaction with these processes expressed in interview as a cue to opening up discussion about the possibility of changing, and perhaps decoupling, the role of the principal's line manager (currently the Educational Director) from principal selection.

Mader (in press) provides an historical backdrop to this discussion. He notes that the 1989 decision 'to desist from making principal appointments permanent' and to instead have principals 'appointed locally by Regional Directors to a defined tenure' meant that '(t)he delegated authority principals had been given … was now subject to the professional judgment of those who line-managed or supervised them'. Mader (in press) goes on to suggest that '(f)or tenured principals, keeping the job became as important as doing the job'.

Hitching an argument about changing processes of principal selection to reconceptualising the principal role relies on turning the already detailed descriptions in the previous section of risk aversion, unwilling compliance and defensiveness towards possibilities for the emergence of bolder and more productive local and individual interpretations of the role. For example, it suggests an endorsement of creative, varied and context-specific principal practices that work alongside or outside of a centrally prescribed improvement agenda and imagines a more active principal voice that is less concerned with being aligned to approved policy scripts and more interested in local advocacy and in making a unique contribution to the system. Such a move also suggests a changed relationship, including a shift in power relations, between EDs and principals. It asks the question, 'would the qualities that principals value and admire in EDs (fulsomely articulated in our IPP research) be more widely and fully exemplified in practice if the yoke of principal selection was removed from the ED role?'

## Sub-theme 2: Imagining and enacting new models of school leadership

The tenuous line between an apparent certainty in leadership theory and the contingency of leader practice is exemplified in the various frustrations expressed in interview with being designated as 'instructional' or 'transformational' leader or of being charged with enacting 'distributed' models of school leadership. Read alongside a preference expressed in interview and backed by quantitative data for what is termed, in this study, 'cultural leadership', these theoretical models require close scrutiny of their current applicability in order to deliberate on their fit within a reconceptualised principal role.

Importantly, several principals point to the simplified calls to theoretical models (such as instructional and transformational and distributed leadership models) that defy the reality of school complexity and competing responsibilities. Applied especially to instructional leadership, these calls, according to our research, create a desire to be and to be seen as the leader of teaching and learning in the school, with the pressures of time and tasks often appearing to thwart that desire. One relevant observation made by several interviewees is that the designation 'headteacher' is a better fit with their expertise and the leader they would prefer to be. By contrast, other groups of interviewees admit to either performing a mostly symbolic version of instructional leadership or actively divesting themselves of the tag by delegating work to other designated leaders. This mixture of insights suggests the need, in any reconceptualisation of the role, to firstly address the question of whether the principal is to be designated as the school's instructional leader/leader of teaching and learning. Additionally, IPP surfaces a range of associated questions about the principal practices that constitute instructional leadership, the knowledge and expertise needed for the role and the relations of instructional leadership and other ways of leading.

> *I've got a bit of instructional leadership, I've got a bit of collaborative leadership, I've got a bit of dictator leadership, I've got a mix of a lot of things, I don't think you can categorise any one thing. (i30)*
>
> *Being a servant leader is doing what you can for people, and being an instructional leader is working with people in amongst them upskilling them guiding them through things. And so the two philosophies if you like, or two styles, align very closely (i28).*
>
> *I always keep in the back of my head that I'm the head teacher of the school. Because I think at the end of the day, I'm leading our teachers, and I'm leading the learning within the school. From my perspective that's always been my title, head teacher. (i17)*
>
> *… you get into leadership quite often because you are the best teacher. And then you get into leadership, and you're out of the classroom. And you're not using those strengths as well as you could be (i21).*
>
> *When you're trying to lead improvement, or make transformational changes, I think it would be really, really difficult to get staff on board if, as the principal, you don't have that knowledge because you can't engage in those conversations and just wouldn't have the credibility with staff. (i27)*

## Sub-theme 3: An enlivened agency

References to *agency* in interview transcripts, largely involve participants linking accounts of their own practice to: (i) the creation of student agency and student voice, and (ii) enhanced teacher agency in terms of giving teachers a greater say in deciding their own classroom practice. While the realisation of these endeavours presents as worthy and worthwhile, this final sub-theme has been identified in more disparate and diffuse references that interviewees make to their own freedoms and is an entree to thinking about how these freedoms might manifest in a reconceptualised version of the principal role. As such, it is a sub-theme that works away from earlier references to an 'anxious autonomy' and runs closer to what De Lissovoy (2018) terms 'collective commitment and enlivened agency' (p. 187). In an expansive analysis of IPP data, four possible manifestations are considered.

***Principal as policy activator:*** Firstly, within the strictures of policy work, principals appear to fashion out 'spaces of freedom' (Dolan, 2020) where they can make decisions about how they will respond to outside policy demands. In terms of actual principal practice, interviewees provided insights into a multiplicity of responses to outside policy demands. As well as a general willingness to align and comply, more nuanced policy work could be detected in:

- tendencies to deflect, ignore and delay policy work when centralised policy is adjudged ineffectual or not providing a satisfactory return for effort;

- adapting, complementing and settling outside policy in ways that make it a better fit to local needs and more palatable to school communities;

- buffering school staff from perceived negative effects of policy, especially when it is adjudged detrimental to the work of classroom teachers; and

- using outside policy as a mandate for desired school reform, especially when principals have struggled to enact change in the face of local resistance.

Denoting principals as 'activators' of policy not only picks up the threads of these local practices, but also lifts them out of a subterranean 'black market' of unofficial responses and quiet subversion. In reconceptualisation, positioning principals as policy activators might include: (i) acknowledging that the intentions of policy makers will never be exactly realised in the practicalities of principal implementation, (ii) de-emphasising linear connections in the policy chain based on an assumption of willing principal compliance, (iii) recognising the valuable work principals do to settle policy and make it work in their local context, and (iv) involving principals more authentically and fully at all stages of the policy 'process'. As a category of 'enlivened agency', each of these reconceptualisation possibilities works against a compulsion to quickly comply and asks, instead, that principals be positioned and position themselves as reflexive professionals, alive to the wisdom of their own decision-making and to the policy influence they might exert within and beyond their schools.

> *You do get pressures because we're virtually technicians because whatever comes from the department ... you can say no and you can ignore, but it depends where you are in your career … So you need to know how to play the game.  It's a moral dilemma sometimes. (i42)*
>
> *[While] I won't ever work against the system, I work for the benefit of my students and my staff and my community. So, when things are not making sense or are not to their benefit, I see this as part of my role is to challenge that and also protect my community from the negative impact of policy. And there are plenty of examples there. (i16)*
>
> *It involves quite a bit of interpretation of what's coming from head office and applying it to the site. It's a fine line. As the principal, we have to be seen to be doing what's been asked of us. But knowing our context, it's then explaining that in terms that can bring our local community on board with what's needed ... But it felt like we're just having to play a bit of a game to make it all work. Compliancy rather than what we really need to be doing. (i27)*

***Professional accountability.*** Using the data depicted in Figure 24 to support reconceptualisation possibilities associated with principal accountability, 53% of survey respondents rated 'reducing external accountabilities imposed on principals and their schools' as important in helping with the manageability of their role. When coupled with two other survey responses – 'giving principals more autonomy in making decisions that impact their schools' (45.2%) and 'giving principals more agency in planning and leading change in their schools' (41.6%) – new questions arise about both the time-for-effort value of external accountability measures and the relations between these measures and principal autonomy and agency.

References to external accountability, under the sub-theme 'Being accountable' in the previous section, focussed on system-led accountability processes and referenced an anxious autonomy founded in the conditional freedoms that principals might fashion at individual decision points. However, a broader brush of accountability references in interview, shifts emphasis away from the downward pressure of external forces to reveal, in school-based accountability, different versions and more diverse interests. Here possibilities for greater principal agency appear to emerge. *e.g.,*

1. *In comparisons between external and local accountability*: several participants describe how local accountabilities, especially those felt by other leaders in their schools, eschew techniques of close scrutiny and micromanagement. One interviewee talks of a tendency towards allowing colleagues 'freedom in their role', while 'holding each other to account'. Another describes a version of 'responsive' and 'enabling' principal leadership that 'keeps the umbrella open' but invites others to 'hold themselves accountable for their own practice'.

2. *Fostering intrinsic motivation:* as a practice of 'internal' accountability, interviewees talk about finding and building intrinsic motivation in their school-based colleagues. Observations about the importance of responsibility, professionalism, and passion not only contrast sharply with the processual qualities of official accountability processes but are also accompanied by suggestions that they are more personal and elusive elements of accountability and that they sit, at least in part, outside of the direct influence that the principal can have on others.

> *It's how you intrinsically motivate people to hold themselves accountable for their own practise as opposed to telling them through performance management processes, 'well, this is what you should be doing'. (i14)*

Through a reconceptualisation lens, these theoretical ideas about local and intrinsic accountabilities (and a thin slice of references to their associated practices), invite a series of questions that need to be addressed in any future reforms. For example, are the aspirations of the current system-led accountability regimes being achieved in practice? In system-led accountability processes (including school review, site improvement planning and principal performance management), how is the return-for-effort equation understood by the system and by school leaders? What are the likely effects of reducing the ways principals and schools are held to account by the system? What form might 'local' and 'internal' accountabilities take and what purposes might they serve?

***Principal voice and the power of the collective.*** Previous analysis under the sub-theme of managing risks noted some of the dangers of speaking up and speaking out. One interesting set of relevant insight emerging from analysis of interview data are the effects of the 'longitudinal' trajectory of principal experience. Many interviewees note changes in their practice over time including the emergence of a more confident principal voice and a keener interest in having that voice heard. Some also notice a more strident tone emerging in the later stages of their careers. Others claim that longer experience, through multiple tenures in different sites or extended stays in the one school, is accompanied by growing confidence, more detailed knowledge, a greater propensity for speaking out and a deeper interest in being involved in reform beyond their own schools. Some observations from qualitative data add further detail to the proposition that 'longitudinal' trajectory of principal experience impacts on various aspects of principal voice.

- On becoming more confident over time

> (Principals) *get more confident over time … acquiring a more substantial reputation over time, and being able to draw on that … I think that for my work, particularly the last few years, the courage to and conviction to be able to follow through, that relentless commitment. And having the courage to actually stand up for the decisions that I make and being able to act decisively. (i13)*
>
> *In some ways, my job has become less complex because I'm more experienced in what I'm dealing with …I just feel personally more confident as the principal and I just know more of the systems and things (i34).*
>
> *When I initially started, it was about making sure that all the boxes were ticked, timelines were absolutely met … that sense of compliance. And now, I feel very confident in making sure that I work really hard for my site, my staff, my community. (i16)*

- On capitalising on experience and credibility

> *I think once you got the runs on the board, which I probably feel I do now, I think you can weather a poor decision because you've got now three years behind you of positivity and growth. (i21)*
>
> *I think the older you get, the more savvy you get about what you're prepared to do, but also I don't get emotionally invested anymore. I've learned to separate me from my job. (i33)*
>
> *I think a lot of early career principals are scared to say no to things. And that worries me. And I just say to them, 'don't do it, what are they going to do? Just copy mine, no one cares'. That's true, they don't care about half that stuff. Writing things down doesn't make them real. (i15)*

- On the obligation to make a contribution beyond the school

> *[On] the role of the principal and how that could evolve, I think the principal as leader, not just within the school, but actually within the system needs to improve and it needs to change. I think we've got an obligation, moral and otherwise, to lead not just within our schools, but actually beyond the system and beyond ascribed roles … leading change at that level. When I notice something's not working and my network notices something's not working, we have got an obligation to do something about it rather than moan about it to each other. That's true leadership. (i16)*

Many interviewees who reference increased personal agency and autonomy through a more active and influential principal voice pair these references with the importance of their networks and alliances. As previously suggested, these principal groupings range across formally constituted DfE Partnerships, professional associations (such as SAPPA, SASPA and SAASLA) and local alliances, but also include local support groups and informal gatherings of like-minded principals. As well as frequent 'strength in numbers' claims that suggest that a collective voice mitigates individual risk, other more expansive references talk about the capacity of networks and alliances to do political work by caucusing around issues in common, to be more formidable in dealings with outside demands, and to more easily attracting system leaders to the table for productive dialogue.

> *I think you can be more vocal in your mantra when you take up the role of principal … sometimes I think it is about that call to arms and it is about building that collective voice and ensuring that everybody has common understandings and commitment even if the passion might wane amongst individuals. (i38)*

Dolan and Mader (2024) note that 'the capacity of principals to realise new versions of themselves … relies, at least in part, on the collective will of their alliances and networks' (p. 171). In interview, this sentiment is exemplified in the possibilities that various groupings provide principals for personal and professional growth. Wide ranging supports such as research work, professional learning and mentoring are noted, with Association board membership singled out by several interviewees as particularly useful.

Continuing to follow Dolan and Mader (2024) 'a shaping of the profession's passions' (p. 176) seems to provide a purpose for linking both individual and collective versions of principal voice to role reconceptualisation interests. In practice, achieving this purpose is imbricated with complex deliberations on an array of fronts, many of which are suggested but not fully explored in this research project. Joining ideas from interview participants with the relevant literatures, some of the points from which these deliberations might proceed include:

- Providing opportunities in the role for principals 'to enact leadership beyond the borders of their schools and communities' (OECD, 2020, p. 51). As one interviewee notes, 'I want to be connected and drive change across the system in some amazing way … I don't want to leave disgruntled in the end' (i13). One relevant reflection in TALIS research findings (OECD, 2020) is that '(p)olicy makers could benefit from engaging more in genuine and sustained dialogue with the profession on education policy, as a way to build up trust over time' (p. 51).

- Clarifying the relations of trust, risk and power in the principal role. A connection was made in qualitative data analysis in Section 4 between principal practices of compliance and the propensity of individuals to take risks. The following excerpt captures the central importance of trust in how this connection plays out in practice.

> *There's a lot of risk averse stuff in place that does not instil confidence in the principals. That sense of lack of trust in the responsibilities that come with the job, that is won through merit, can undermine the overall capacity of the leader and the influence of the leader. (i38)*

The relations of trust and risk are further informed by Gronn (2011) who observes that 'trust and risk are inherent in leadership practice' and that the increased vulnerability of school leaders is tied to the various consequences that flow from leaders having to make decisions in environments 'characterised simultaneously by high risk and low trust' (p. 91). In thinking about reconceptualisation, principal decision making emerges as a key arena for debate and possible reform. Gronn (2011) goes on to claim that it is the concept of 'discretionary power' that distinguishes the professional worker from an employee who carries out an instruction (p. 96). Applying this line of argument to rethinking the principal role, means that the aspiration to increase trust is joined up with principal professionalism – with awarding principals more discretion and influence by trusting their personal judgment to choose courses of action appropriate to their local context.

Already well-rehearsed under previous themes, the importance of a more prominent principal voice, as a priority in reconceptualisation, finds arguably its most powerful rationale in the local and specific knowledge that accumulates in and from principal practice. Two useful insights cement the importance of principals speaking up and speaking out as local experts. Firstly, principals have 'funds of knowledge'[5] that are often subjugated or sidelined and yet, as amply demonstrated through voices of principals in the IPP interview study, hold significant potential for helping address persistent and emerging issues, bringing the wisdom of practice to theory and policy and for informing systemic change. Secondly, from Practice Architecture Theory, in the *social-political arrangements* (e.g., relationships between people, roles, power structures, organisational rules/policies) impacting principal practice, principal voice insofar as it manifests as a source of power and solidarity, can be considered a resource that makes new ways of relating possible. A more prominent principal voice can be directed to addressing and redressing difficult 'power over' and 'power to' configurations in order to 'enhance reciprocity in communication and create enabling conditions for the negotiation of relational and practical continuity' (Boyle, Petriwskyj & Grieshaber, 2018, p. 425).

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## 6. Conclusion

In conducting the research project *Illuminating Principal Practice*, an initial commitment in planning to 'shed light on the extent and complexity of current practices' coupled with the methodological choice to lead with qualitative study in both data collection and analysis, created an extensive and

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[5] Moll et al., (1992) was a pioneer in developing 'funds of knowledge' theory, noting that these 'funds' referred to 'historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for … individual functioning and well-being' (p. 133), and pertaining to 'social, economic, and productive activities of people' (p. 139) in local communities.

richly descriptive storying of principals' work. Here the first intention was to compile a broad explication, built on a commitment to the IPP objective to reveal 'the extent and complexity of current practices'. Subsequently, the seeing of possible reforms to the principal role through a lens of reconceptualisation meant that data analysis took on a more dynamic, critical and reflexive character.

Reconceptualisation carried with it a potential for some 'futuring', which Gunter and Fitzgerald (2008) describe as 'trajectories of possible developments … linked from past to present to future' where 'positions can be taken on how and why change needs to be taken' (p. 6). The key findings and recommendations which follow, although reflecting the functional character of overarching themes and sub-themes, are positioned to complete a move from the hands of the researchers to those who will use it and, hopefully, to become a resource which usefully informs the agenda that lies ahead.

## Key findings

*Current principal practices and conditions of practice: Constraints and enablers*

1. For principals, ways of leading are deeply influenced by contextual variables, including school size, location and locality, level of disadvantage, extent of principal experience and time spent in the role at the current school.

2. Amongst different ways of leading, fostering a positive, participative and successful school culture is of central importance. 'Cultural leadership' serves as a descriptor for capturing those practices that principals believe contribute to the wellbeing and success of their schools.

3. Instructional leadership (or leading teaching and learning) is variously expressed in principal practice, with a willingness to lead pedagogy, curriculum and teacher professional learning, mitigated by uncertainties amongst some principals about their capacity to direct their leadership towards improving teaching and learning outcomes.

4. Distributive leadership models, in practice, continue to be guided by in-school decisions about the allocation of responsibility and are generally directed to issues of more equitable management of the workloads of designated leaders.

5. Principals maintain a strong interest in social justice leadership, in particular, the shifting of theory to practice in ways that commit them to ongoing reflection and action, influence the practices of others and meet the needs of all students.

*The broad umbrella of job satisfaction*

6. Principals are experiencing an intensification of administrative work. Administrative tasks associated with, for example, human resource and personnel management (exacerbated by current teacher shortages), financial and facilities management, accountability processes, data collection, and critical incident reporting, are widely considered unnecessarily time-consuming, burdensome and as negatively impacting job satisfaction.

7. Principals express feelings of drudgery and a perceived shift in their status from educators to administrators, with the increase in administrative workload linked to reduced time available for essential tasks related to interactions with teachers, students and the broader school community.

8. Changes in complexity and diversity of the student cohort is a major source of work intensification and a key influence on principal job satisfaction. Principals highlight the challenges of adapting to diverse student needs, with workload implications in leading pedagogical change, managing student behaviour, accessing special needs expertise, managing external providers, developing appropriate facilities and facilitating productive parent interactions.

9. Principals acknowledge the need for accountability, but present varying perspectives on the practical implications of external accountability tools and processes. These perspectives include questions about the effectiveness of current accountabilities and their capacity to impact school outcomes.

10. Principals identify multiple sources of stress, anxiety and vulnerability and link these to issues of personal and professional wellbeing and sustainability.

11. In a marketised school environment, principals are increasingly concerned about reputational risks, unfavourable conditions of school choice and competition and the negative impacts of data-led comparisons.

12. Principals describe a significant challenge in navigating outside policy demands and claim these demands often impede their ability to address the unique needs of their local communities.

13. Educational Directors (EDs), as immediate line managers, have a key influence on principal job satisfaction. The ED/principal relationship is linked to principal policy compliance, career risks, local agency and autonomy, and feelings of worth, support and professionalism.

14. Principals express strong commitment to enacting the requirements of their position, find numerous positive aspects to their job and often gain satisfaction from local complexities, responding to diverse needs and gaining positive recognition from others.

These findings map some of the terrain over which the 'sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings' of principal practice are dispersed, while continually acknowledging the presence of inside and outside constraints and enablers of practice and the boundary conditions that demarcate and contain the principal role.

## Recommendations

*How can the role of the principal be reconceptualised?*

The question of how the principal role might be reconceptualised in the future, as the third key concept framing IPP, appears in the body of this report as a less constrained and more imaginative set of ideas. In this executive summary, it marks out the project's recommendations.

**Recommendation 1**
**Rationalise the administrative responsibilities and reduce the administrative workload of principals.**
In practice:
- Centralise administrative tasks.
- Reduce the administrative workload of principals by reducing the accountability, reporting and compliance expectations of DfE central office.
- Create more user-friendly centralised timelines, systems and technologies.
- Build in-school models of distributed leadership that include dispersing administrative responsibilities.
- Change existing in-school roles to include administrative tasks and responsibilities currently held by principals (including expanding the Business Manager role).

**Recommendation 2**
**Implement new leadership models and structures**
- Recognise the cultural leadership of the principal – that fostering a positive, participative and successful school culture is centrally important in the success of a school and its principal.
- Develop models of instructional and transformational leadership appropriate to the principal role and founded on successful current practice and the local needs of schools.
- Develop the notion of 'leader praxis' to inform theory into practice leadership, principal reflexivity and enacting of the purposes of schooling in more socially just and equitable ways.
- Devise and trial rial new models of principal deployment (e.g., role-sharing and executive principal models).

**Recommendation 3**
**Address issues of principal workload, stress and wellbeing.**
In practice:
- Reduce outside policy demands in favour of a stronger principal focus on local needs.
- Direct the work of the system, associations, and principal alliances to mitigating risks inherent in school promotion, parental choice, and marketisation and competition.
- Reduce the workload, stressors and risks associated with external accountability processes.
- Develop a comprehensive understanding of wellbeing strategies for principals and incorporate wellbeing explicitly in the role statement for the principal position.

**Recommendation 4**

**Modify current approaches to school/principal accountability**

In practice:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of current external accountability processes (e.g., in terms of workload, return-for-effort, links to school improvement).
- Develop, share and implement local accountability processes based on agreed local improvement priorities.
- Define notions of intrinsic motivation, professional accountability and internal accountability, and explore and evaluate their practical value.
- Critically evaluate the effectiveness of processes of line management, performance appraisal and merit selection in the current ED/Principal relationship.

**Recommendation 5**

**Work to increase levels of principal job satisfaction.**

In practice:

- Apply reimagined versions of principal autonomy to processes of accountability, school improvement, policy work and leadership of local initiatives.
- Develop the ED/Principal relationship by foregrounding ED provision of confidential wellbeing support, timely advice, system knowledge and professional regard.
- Address and mitigate the negative impact of career risks on principals.
- Critically appraise processes of selection, principal appointment/reappointment and extension of tenure with a view to formulating alternatives based on principles of merit, transparency, fairness and harm minimisation.

**Recommendation 6**

**Give principals a louder and stronger voice.**

In practice:

- Remove structures, processes and relationships founded the need for principal conformity and compliance.
- Position the principal as 'policy activator' by fostering stronger and more authentic principal participation in policy work within and beyond the school.
- Provide opportunities for principals to be influential at system level.
- Encourage and promote principal involvement in associations, networks and alliances.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A:  Theory of Practice Architectures

According to Mahon et al. (2017), Practice Architecture Theory 'is an account of what practices are composed of and how practices shape and are shaped by the arrangements with which they are enmeshed in a site of practice' (p. 7). In defining *practice*, a term that is ubiquitous in education, Kemmis (2019) explains that it is:

> … a form of human action in history, in which particular activities (doings) are comprehensible in terms of particular ideas and talk (sayings), and when the people involved are distributed in particular kinds of relationships (relatings), and when this combination of sayings, doings and relatings *'hangs together'* in the project of the practice (the ends and purposes that motivate the practice). (pp. 2-3)

Put more simply, practices comprise of 'sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings' that work together in the *project* of a practice. A project involves (a) the purpose (objective) that drives the practice, (b) the actions (interconnected sayings, doings and relatings) carried out in the execution of the practice, and (c) the outcomes the practitioner seeks to attain through the practice (even if these outcomes do not eventuate) (Mahon *et al*., 2017, p. 8). For instance, when a principal is engaged in *praxis* – that is, 'acting in ways that are morally, ethically and politically responsible' – one of the projects of practice is likely to be to support a site plan which focuses on the needs and purposes of students and their communities (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2015, p. 150).

*Practice architectures* 'are the preconditions that prefigure practices; these make practices possible and hold them in place' (Rönnerman, Grootenboer & Edwards-Groves, 2017, p. 6). Specifically, practice architectures consist of three interdependent, and thus inseparable, dimensions – found in or brought to a particular site – that 'create the working conditions to enable or constrain particular practices' (Goodyear, Casey & Kirk, 2017, p. 238). They include:

a) *Cultural-discursive arrangements* (e.g., language, specialised discourse) which are realised in semantic space and support the sayings of a practice; together with,

b) *Material-economic arrangements* (e.g., financial resources, timetables, physical environment) are realised in physical space-time and support the doings of practice; together with,

c) *Social-political arrangements* (e.g., relationships between people, roles, power structures, organisational rules/policies) operate in social space and are encountered through the medium of power and solidarity and the resources that make relating possible or impossible (Boyle, Petriwskyj & Grieshaber, 2018, p. 426). This arrangement underscores the importance of the dynamics of authority, collaboration and societal structures that play a pivotal role in shaping how practices are organised and experienced.

Taken together, as Figure 25 illustrates, the three arrangements provide the intersubjective spaces and media (language, material and social resources) that make a practice possible (Kemmis, 2022, p. 77). However, these arrangements do not predetermine or predestine a particular form of practice in a particular site, instead they *shape* practices, allowing for their purposeful development within intersubjective spaces, evolving and adapting to changing times and localised circumstances (Hemmings, Kemmis & Reupert, 2013, pp. 474-475).

*(Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 34)*
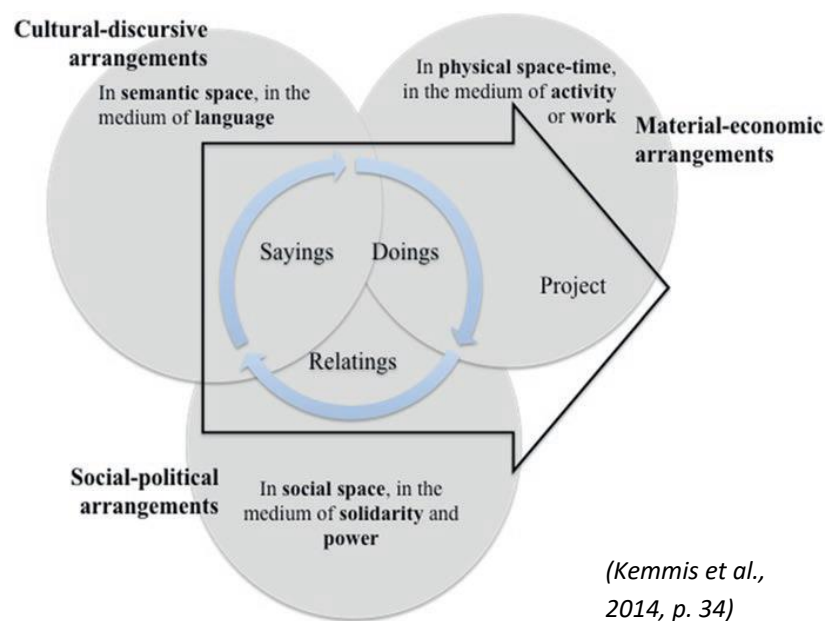
*Figure 25: The spaces and media in which sayings, doings and relatings exist*

*Leading as a socially-just practice*

The theoretical notion of *social justice leadership* discussed in the body of this report includes a description of 'leading praxis', describing a way of leading that shifts theory to practice, commits the principal to ongoing reflection and action, and shifts emphasis beyond personal interests 'to the long term interests of each student' (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). Figure 26 explains leading praxis using the practices and dimensions of Practice Architecture Theory and includes illustrative excerpts from interviews in the IPP project. These excerpts shed light both on the practices – the sayings, doings and relatings – of principals as social justice leaders, as well as the arrangements found in or brought to the site, that constrain and enable principal practices.

Wilkinson (2016) makes direct connections between 'leading praxis' – with its disposition towards a socially-critical practice tradition – and the contours and practices of social justice leadership in noting that:

> *… leading as a socially just practice is composed of a set of practical and political actions, i.e., actions which cannot be foretold or steered at a distance by central policies, implementation plans, or accountability mechanisms. Leading practices are struggled over, hard-won, constantly contested, and must be interactionally secured in the moment-by-moment 'happening-ness' of practices within specific sites.* (pp. 165-166)

Wilkinson's (2016) description pinpoints the inherently *political* nature of social justice leadership. The author further notes, in line with the arrangements depicted in Figure 26, the value of Practice Architecture Theory in foregrounding and rendering visible the culture, discourses, and material and economic arrangements that prefigure educational practices. This theoretical contribution, continuing to follow the arguments of Wilkinson (2016), works as an antidote to the tendency of mainstream analyses to 'depoliticise and neuter the power relations inherent in educational leadership practice' (p. 179).

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**Practices** are interactionally secured in principals.

**Intersubjective space/ medium**

**Practice architectures** are composed of arrangements within DfE school sites that enable or constrain practices of leading

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**The principal and leading 'praxis'**

*Characteristic 'sayings':*

Assets-based sayings about students and their knowledge
*'My job is to provide a curriculum that supports my kids to access learning because there's no reason why any student who walks through these doors can't achieve' (i33)*

Values student wellbeing
*'… the whole child needs to be nurtured' (i17)*

In *semantic space*, realised in the medium of *language*

*Cultural-discursive arrangements* **found in or brought to site***:*

Common professional language

Student wellbeing embedded in philosophy and site structures
*'… we've got wellbeing leaders and a youth worker as well' (i19)*

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*Characteristic 'doings':*

Creates a culture of care and collaboration

Works and liaises with community
*'… social media is one of the ways that we try and work with the community' (i3)*

Builds teaching and leading capacity:
*'… build your team up' (i2)*
*'… the principal role is primarily about developing the capacity of people who work in schools' (i33)*

In *physical space-time*, realised in the medium of *activity* and *work*

*Material-economic arrangements* **found in or brought to site***:*

Physical spaces and resources

School funding

Systemic policy requirements
*'In terms of policies, that has a huge impact on what you can and can't do' (i7)*
*'The change of system narrative is slowly creeping through. I think there's a lot of EDs that are struggling with that because the corporate alignment piece is easier to manage' (i43)*

Site improvement plans

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*Characteristic 'relatings':*

Values social justice

Empathy for students and families

Values students' and teachers' voice and agency
*'I got rid of the scripted "this is how teaching should be and put the professional responsibility back with the teacher to release the shackles' (i1)*

Builds collaborative relationships with staff and community
*'…. we have to find ways to give voice to the community' (i23)*

In *social space*, realised in the medium of *power* and *solidarity*

*Social-political arrangements* **found in or brought to site***:*
Distributed leadership

Respects and celebrates diversity and difference
*'We are accountable for equity, we are accountable for serving the needs of our community' (i23)*

Line manager relationships
*'The CE and Minister have a massive influence on the direction of schools at a local level' (i21)*

**The education site**

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**… which are bundled together in the *projects* of practices and *dispositions* of principals.**

**… which are bundled together in characteristic ways in *practice landscapes* and *practice traditions*.**
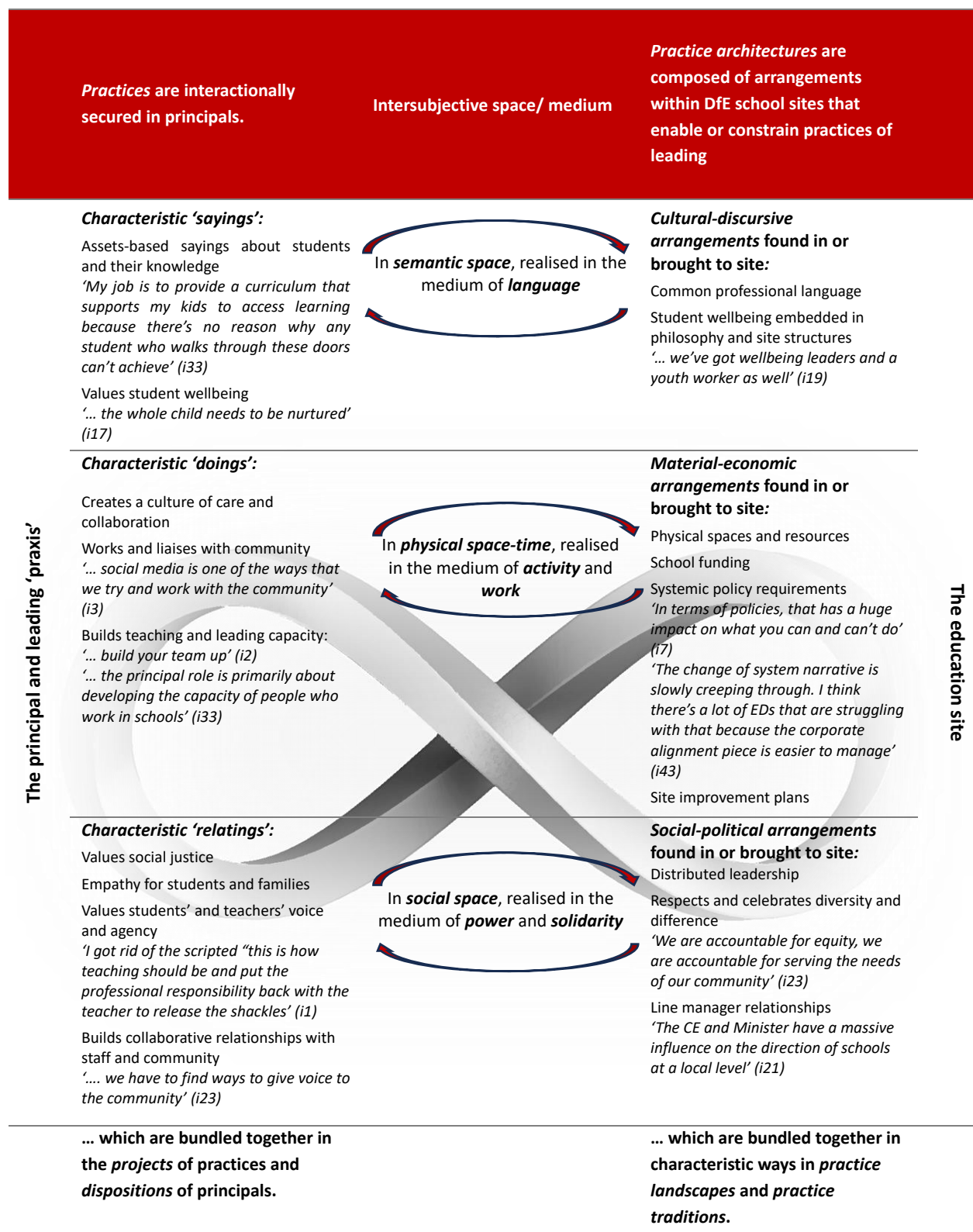
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*Figure 26: Crafting practice architectures which enable leader praxis*

*(based on Kemmis & Groves, 2018, p.20)*

*The ecology of practice*

Kemmis and colleagues (2014) stretch the nature of practices further to analyse them as lively, interconnected arrangements, akin to ecological systems (p. 43). Their concept of *ecologies of practices* builds on the notion that practices, in this case educational settings – depicted in Figure 1.1 as student learning, teaching, professional learning, researching, education policy, administration, and leading – are not isolated entities but are part of dynamic, interwoven systems. Each practice influences and is influenced by others, forming a network of mutual exchange in the ways they articulate, act, and relate to each other within a specific context (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014, p. 50). For instance, the words a principal uses to articulate students as equally intelligent and capable learners (the sayings contained in their leading) might be assimilated by a teacher and expressed in their classroom as high expectations for their students (the sayings contained in their teaching) and in turn, may shape the words used by the students to talk about themselves as successful learners (the sayings contained in their learning).

However, the practices do not operate in a pyramidical form where the practice of leading is understood to be at the apex filtering down into student learning, rather, each practice feeds into and informs the other to work in a network of mutual exchange (see Figure 27). In the context of this project, ecological constructions of principal practice were evident through the qualitative study with principals frequently describing and justifying their practice in relation to other site-based practices (i.e., student learning, teaching, professional learning and educational research). Practices, including leading practice, then, are not standalone; they coexist and intricately interact, much like living entities within an ecosystem. Viewing practices through this lens allows us to perceive them as interconnecting within 'ecologies of practices' – the living systems where practices derive their essential properties from their relationships with other practices, adapting and evolving in response to one another (Kemmis *et al.*, 2012, p. 40). Similar to the variations in ecosystems based on geography and climate, practices within ecologies may exhibit local and regional differences.
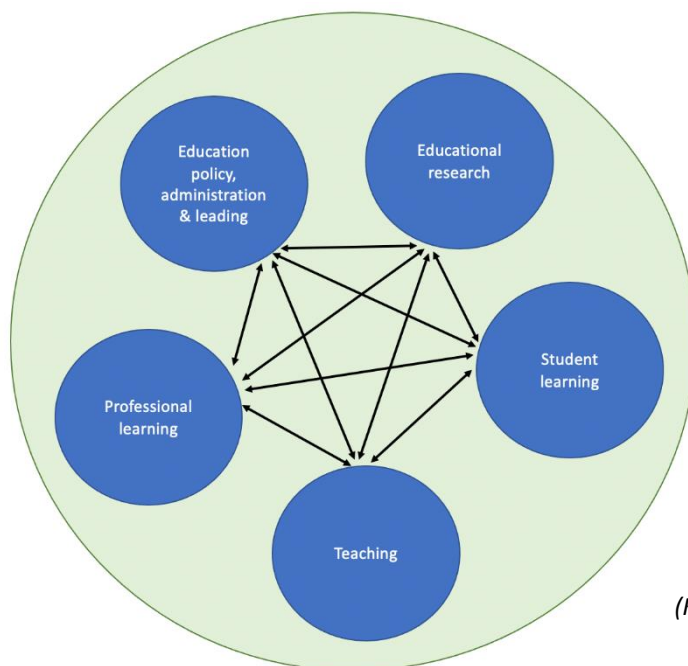


(Kemmis et al., 2012, p. 36)

*Figure 27: An ecology of practice*

Altering practice necessitates not only disrupting, but also modifying the practice architectures (i.e., material-economic, cultural-discursive and social-political arrangements) that precede and shape it. Transforming principals' leading practices then requires bringing about attention to the conditions in which they work. Without changing these conditions (i.e., practice architectures), creating positive and sustainable transformations in principals' leading practices becomes difficult, if not impossible.

In this report, the Practice Architecture Theory is used as an organiser for the constraining and enabling conditions – i.e., material-economic, cultural-discursive and social-political arrangements /conditions – of principals' practice. Although the theory has been applied lightly across much of the discussion of results, it features more heavily in our consideration for the possibilities of reconceptualising the role of the principal and recommendations made.

## Appendix B: Principal practice in Area / small schools – a case study.

Data collection and analysis in *Illuminating Principal Practice* revealed and constantly reiterated the heterogeneity of schools and principals in South Australian state education system. While some coherence is found in the systemic banner under which schools gather and the various networks and alliances that bring principals together, sharp differences also persist. These differences are often captured in various dualities and divides – rich/poor, city/country, large/small, metropolitan/remote and isolated etc – and are linked to a vast array of differentiated effects.

This short case study draws from input provided by principal interviewees in small schools – most often Area Schools but also including a number of smaller rural primary schools. The case study is organised around principal practices and the small school contextual variables that shape them. Selected excerpts from interview are used to support the various general claims made[6].

**Workload**

The cumulative responses of interviewees build a strong case for greater acknowledgement of the principal workload in small schools. Several components are covered, including:

- that the workload is comparable with larger schools:

> *… there has to be some kind of understanding that the workload doesn't get any less with less kids, you still have the same administrative responsibilities, you still have finance, you still have all of those things, you still have complex behaviours. [And] more of our kids are getting more and more complex, there are more and more external issues that kids bring in with them. (i41)*

- That small school principals often also have a teaching load:

> *I have many hats plus I have a teaching load … I generally teach two days a week … and I have the same responsibilities and expectations as a bigger school down the road without the principal having to teach a teaching load and without having a leadership team, essentially. (i7)*
>
> *I would like to be able to spend more time as an instructional leader, I don't think I've actually hit that nail on the head … or had the time to do it properly. Partly it is because I'm teaching up towards 0.3, which is quite a reasonable workload … I think it's higher here than it is in most other schools … it has been gap filling. (i11).*

- That small school principals are 'spread too thinly' due to a lack of other designated leaders:

> *There's a lot of tasks that a principal at a small school does that always go to other leaders at larger schools. Yes, I do timetabling, I do daily organization. I do all the student behaviour management. I manage the bus … People say to me, 'get one of your leaders to do that'. Well. You're talking to him. (i8)*

Taken together, these observations inform an insight provided by several interviewees about first-time principals choosing a small school:

> *…. there is a misconception around this, it's certainly not a job as a first step. For a principal, I wouldn't say that a small school is a good place to start (i7).*

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[6] Additionally, Appendix D includes extensive insights about small / Area Schools taken from survey responses in the quantitative component of IPP.

**Collaboration and shared responsibility**

Axiomatically, principals in small schools face significant challenges with collaboration and the sharing of responsibility. The reduced interaction and flexibility that accompanies small staff and student numbers underpins principal concerns about a lack of opportunities for exchange of ideas, new learning opportunities and social contact. e.g.,

- The problems of isolation:

*But what [our students] don't have is that curiosity, being able to play, share, investigate, independence, those kinds of skills that come from being with other people who are the same age and having the resources that other schools have got. (i50)*

*[In the city] I can go to Flinders Street and get support if I need it. If you're out in the country, you're on the end of a phone. (i33)*

*I would love to be able to get teachers to collaborate across other schools. We have one R-2 teacher, one 3-6 teacher. It's very isolated (LM).*

- Sharing the load: Principals in small schools with limited leadership budgets must find creative ways to distribute responsibility:

*Everybody has to take on additional roles in our school. We have a reasonable teaching staff but we have very small classes. We have set that up because the flip side is that everybody else has taken other jobs as well. (i18)*

*I've got a teacher who is a leader in this one area. So that's great. But we've only been able to do that because we've been creative with the timetable. No extra pay came with it for her. We just created the extra time, which she could put into that. And that particular teacher has been fantastic. She's also put her hand up and is coordinating our sports day. I don't know how many times over six years we've had things come here that were meant to be getting done like work health and safety, which is absolute nightmare … I'd like to have another leader. (i8)*

*I've also released another teacher one whole day a week. And her role is 'the extension leader' … in the course of that day, she's basically an unpaid coordinator … But I also know that I'm showing people that you can actually … create opportunities in a small school with limited flexibility. (i9)*

- The absence of sizable leadership teams in small schools appears to: (i) give rise to a range of creative strategies that principals use to share responsibility and (ii) prompt the forging of close ties with neighbouring schools:

*We work as part of a small schools cluster … so it meant that our staff are on this page … And doing this small schools cluster with our town and the other two schools up the road – little primary schools – it just means that the community also sees us working together. So, they know that we talk to each other (i7)*

*In the context of the district, I'm in the lucky position that we all know each other quite well so building that trust and building that relationship … a lot of that works (i37).*

*We've worked with a few different partners to make sure that what our staff and students needs are best targeted. The Area School Leaders Association has been critical to that. (i2)*

**Curriculum provision**

The provision of an adequate curriculum, especially for students in their secondary years, is a significant challenge in small / Area Schools. Principal interviewees express a strong commitment to offering students a broad and rich curriculum and to the entitlement of their students to equivalent local learning opportunities to their city counterparts. Comments from interviewees exemplify common themes about a lack of subject choice, cross-age classes that span too many primary year levels and a shortage of resources and expertise associated with student mental health and wellbeing. References to sharing of staff and curriculum, and to systems of local delivery provide a promising set of solutions to issues of curriculum provision. Interviewees describe maturing systems and processes, high levels of cooperation and goodwill across schools, and growing numbers of students accessing the curriculum they want.

> *Talking about things like local delivery, I really think we need to do this in Area Schools … for the benefit of all of our kids. We're not going to be able to meet the curriculum needs of all of our students if we don't work together. (i6)*

Issues of curriculum provision link quite directly to:

- viable enrolments and student retention:

> *In small communities, small schools … parents have a choice as to where they send their children … So you have to try and keep your families here and happy rather than moving (i7)*
>
> *Coming to Year 7 people tended to think that they would be far better if they took the kids to the private school (i24)*
>
> *There's one pathway where parents are electing to send their kids away to private schools. That's increased in the last probably five or six years … we find we're losing up to a quarter or a third of our year nine students as they move into year 10. The thing we compete with are the private school facilities and the opportunities that they provide, and the experiences outside of the community. And I understand and get that for some families, they just want their kids to mix with a different bunch of kids and meet some different people. (i20)*

- problems with attracting and retaining skilled teachers:

> *The only way we're going to be able to deliver other subjects outside the English and Maths, like Biology and Physics, Chemistry and History at Year 11 and 12 is flexible learning options. Teachers have to be trained and skilled in those areas. And we don't have access to that. (i8)*
>
> *… it's a challenge when you need little positions. So in a big school, you can generally get someone to do a 0.2 position or two lots of 0.2. (i9)*
>
> *We've advertised a number of positions with no applicants (i11)*
>
> *It's enormous part of the work … So it is harder, you do lots of runs, you do lots of advertisement, you do lots of lots of personal connections. I think recruiting the right people is key. (i21)*
>
> *But if I've advertised once I've advertised 1000 times for tech studies teacher. So we're going this year without a tech studies teacher. (i22)*

**The local community - enablers and constraints**

By far the biggest body of interviewee opinion about principal practices in small/area Schools is centred on relations with local communities and the enablers and constraints that might apply in community interactions. The importance of community relations is emphasised by one interviewee who observes that 'you wouldn't even entertain doing this type of role if you weren't committed to your community' *(i24).* Participants use phrases such as 'there's never a break', 'you're always on' and 'everybody knows you' as common refrains to describe high levels of familiarity, expectations of availability and approachability, and a constant requirement to 'be the principal' in public settings.

> *There are lots of challenges around people wanting your time and being able to balance that time I guess … you certainly are the face of the school in a community like ours. (i24)*
>
> *Everywhere I go in this town, I'm still the principal. (i26)*
>
> *Sometimes in your peer group, if you have a falling out or a student has a falling out, or a staff member has a falling out, there's nowhere to hide, because you have to work with that person. (i2)*
>
> *You go down to the shop, or to the football oval or whatever and everybody knows that you're the principal. You're constantly the principal in a small community. (i7)*
>
> *I think it's very difficult to escape the role. You're in the role 24/7, everywhere you go, you've got parents around you, you've got students around you. So even going down to the pub is something that you're kind of always mindful of … certainly that working in a fishbowl is challenging. (i20)*

While some constraints on practice run through the excerpts above, interviewees are quick to point to numerous advantages – enablers of practice that support their effectiveness and job satisfaction.

> *Parents really know you on a personal level, and they begin to build another layer of trust and respect, outside of just what they see from a school perspective … people recognize that you still need to be a human, you still need to have your downtime and do things outside of school so that you're not always just at school …. that code switching. (i21)*
>
> *A lot of us live in the local community and have connections within that community … we know the kids and we know their families; we know their siblings; we know who they're related to. We know a lot, which is also a negative because we know too much sometimes. But I think it helps us to put those kids in context and work out where they're coming from and why they're doing what they do. (i18)*
>
> *But the thing about an area school that I really love is that you can see a child start from reception and they go through to Year 12. (i24)*

## Appendix C: Interview questions

The following are the interview questions sent to participants prior to interview.

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**Indicative interview questions**

The questions in bold represent the lead questions to be asked in interview. The content under each lead question is to help the researcher orient and enlarge the interviewee's responses.

1. **What does your chosen artefact (or metaphor) 'say' about your leadership?**
2. **How do you differentiate your responsibility and practices as principal from other leaders in your school?**
3. **What are the conditions of practice that structure your work as a leader?** e.g.
   - How does outside policy shape what you do? What are the key outside demands that you face and deal with?
   - What do you see as the needs of the community to which your leadership responds? What are the key local demands?
   - How are you held accountable for fulfilling these demands? How do you measure / evaluate / determine your own effectiveness as a leader?
   - In what ways does your leadership context help you bring curiosity and creativity into your work as a principal?

4. **What is your leadership contribution to the culture of the school?** e.g.
   - What professional values do you exhibit and exemplify? How are these visible in your practice?
   - How is relational trust important? How do you build relational trust in your leadership practices?
   - How is wellbeing important? How do your leadership practices enhance your personal wellbeing and / or the wellbeing of others in your school community?
   - Tell me about your role in managing the performance of people in your school and how it is linked to school culture?

5. **How do you see your leadership practices?** e.g.
   - How would you characterise yourself as a leader?
   - What do you do that others don't see, appreciate or understand?
   - What are the practices that characterise you as a leader?
       i. Are you an instructional leader? If yes, what are your practices of instructional leadership?
       ii. Is decision-making important? How do you go about making decisions? Would you call yourself a transformational leader?
       iii. Are you a collaborative leader? If yes, how do you provide strong leadership while maintaining a commitment to collaboration?
   - Which practices take significant role in your role but which you don't consider as leadership practices?

6. **How would you change the context / circumstances in which you lead?** e.g.
   - How would you change the outside influences on your role?
   - How would you change your local circumstances?
   - How would you foster greater creativity, curiosity and risk-taking?
   - What relationships would you want to work on / change?

7. **How do you imagine the role of principal might be different?** e.g.
   - Which practices are important to keep?
   - Which practices should be modified or dispensed with?
   - What are the new practices that should become part of the principal role.

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## Appendix D:  A reconceptualisation resource

**Responses to survey Question 24 (Optional) Do you have any further suggestions for reconceptualising the role of the principal?**

The following data, gathered from responses to the final question in the IPP survey, are included as an additional resource for use in stakeholder discussions about reconceptualising the role of principal. For readability and ease of use, the data has been assembled under headings. However, responses have not been chosen selectively, or rationalised for reasons of duplication, or significantly edited (i.e., spelling and typing mistakes have been corrected). Given that the survey was taken anonymously, responses cannot be ascribed individual identifiers. Respondents could only make one response.

*Site context (including small / rural / remote school issues)*

*As a country principal I find that not only do I deal with the additional complexities and frustrations that are forced upon us from departmental or government directives/directions but I have the greater significant burden that most practices/policies are city centric and while they say they consider country schools and communities they do not listen to our views. Too often 'country' schools are considered those within the hills of Adelaide or within 30min-1hr of Adelaide not those who are far removed from the city. More appreciation of our schools and community is needed, not brushed over.*

*Give consideration to the difficulties of working as a sole site leader in many of our country/rural schools.*

*Small schools require greater support and distribution of leadership responsibilities.*

*Revise leadership structures and eligibility so there is more parity between large and small schools and secondary & primary sites. I've worked the hardest in small schools and it's an overwhelming role, and it's often when principals are in their first or second tenure.*

*Provide more administration support to Area School principals who are managing a wider range of issues.*

*Reframe how principals in smaller sites are seen as less worthy of renumeration than principals in large sites. Our teachers all get paid the same why aren't we? Pay should be on experience, increasing as experience increases not size or complexity of site.*

*Acknowledging the complexity of leading small, highly complex schools with minimal leadership support. Acknowledging the workload of a principal who has a small school with a school-based preschool and special class as they are effectively a principal (of the mainstream school), a director (of a preschool) and a coordinator (of a special class) all rolled into one. Even though the number of children is small, the administrative tasks are still equal to big sites however without the leadership capacity to do the tasks. My role is an A3 position however the school down the road that is roughly the same size with no preschool or special options class also has an A3 principal. Finances being granted on the basis of the number of students rather than the size of the school and age of the buildings causes significant stress.*

*Please remove the teaching load for principals in small schools. The load of providing productive current and positive teaching and still focus on the principal role is unmanageable and needs further consideration for principals to do their best work!*

*Need to consider the additional responsibilities of principals in small sites as they have to cover all leadership positions other school would have support for and often the maintenance, cleaning and office positions during their day as there is no-one else available. The roles in smaller schools are even more complex and not recognised by others as important or part of the role. If the principal does not deal with it often it will not be done and this has a direct impact on student learning and staff and student wellbeing - including the principal!*

### Support

*I think the amount of societal pressure on principals needs to be taken further into account, including: rise in threatening abusive students, abusive parents, abusive staff. Although there are many support services and employees within the Department, much of the direct pressure and responsibility to deal with high level student incidents fall directly back to principals often with no tangible support..*

*Interacting with staff is difficult due to having to release them to carry out extended conversations. Teachers have NIT time that most use to meet this needs and do not want to meet init or before or after school. Being able to release teachers more during the day would make our rolls so much easier as we could work on issues without increasing teacher workload*

*Ensure that sites and leaders are supported with improved services from central teams and contractors.*

*Provision of mentors for all principals would be helpful, especially for country principals.*

*The support I have been offered as a first year principal has been crucial to my success and satisfaction. I believe more leaders need to experience the support networks available to help them consider moving into the role. In my site I have been lucky to inherit flexibility with staffing, leaders and finances which has really positively supported my reshaping of the school. Maybe it would be beneficial for all first year principals to be given additional funding to their school to support their start in the role and allow them the flexibility I have been afforded.*

*Providing paid principal mentors eg in first year or during period of significant change at the site 0.2 principal mentor in school.*

### Systemic influences and site autonomy

*Trust is the big one. Then there is the changing demands being placed on leaders to be accountable for driving systemic change without additional support.*

*Trust us to do the job we are appointed to do. Work with us, not do it to us using a one size fits all model.*

*There are many outside pressures and we are pitted against one another for enrolments etc. It is challenging to move a school's reputation and the DfE only supports some schools and political initiatives like the Tech colleges. If we can't advertise public education how can we promote ourselves to be a quality system against the private schools? Our own leaders and staff send students to private schools. Why are we funding schools so unfairly?*

*Retain the current LET structure as it provides principals with valued support from a team that understand and are invested and passionate about our needs, our sites and our school communities.*

*Having the people who are making systemic changes, fully understand the impact of their decision on schools.*

*Pressures are high with every initiative from above channelled through Principal and staff issues and challenges from below focused on the principal.*

*Trust in principals to get on with it and not being micromanaged by ED.*

*Leave us to innovate and do what's right for our community.*

*Continual development of principals as lead educators, rather than system managers serving a central cause.*

*I think that the political landscape has fundamentally shifted with the change of CE and government. The previous focus on a narrow literacy and numeracy SIP has completely changed and I feel that principal autonomy has been considered.*

*Facilities does my head in. Should be managed centrally. Everything! From the painting to plumbing, everything should be the same across all schools. There should be school based traineeships in these roles and when kids graduate they would be employees by DfE as a carpet layer or painter etc for our schools.*

*Much of the administrative tasks could be done centrally – responding to parent complaints is the biggest time waster and there could be a central number to ring to resolve. Elevating the teaching profession needs to occur in the media.*

*Our mission is to lead our school in the direction of progress by bolstering our teachers' capacity to provide top-notch teaching and learning experiences in each and every classroom. This is to ensure that our students have the access, skills, and knowledge required for them to become successful contributors to our community. The constant influx of new ideas into our school system hampers our ability to stay focused on our core objectives. It is disheartening to witness the unrelenting rise in demands and responsibilities, which has led to a significant departure of teachers from our institution. The gap between the education system and our school is widening, leaving principals feeling isolated and incapable of concentrating on our fundamental mission. This is primarily due to the fact that external expectations have become unmanageable and impractical. It is crucial for the system to collaborate closely with principals, empowering them to lead and create learning environments that facilitate the growth and prosperity of both teachers and students.*

**The changing role** *(and changing the role)*

*It has become more an administrative role than a leader of learning. Any action to address this would be beneficial.*

*Over time, the role has changed so much. The role needs to be adaptive, responsive and reflective of the context of the school. Principals need to be intelligent, have critical thinking, and awareness of the broader South Australian system, as well as expertise in curriculum, pedagogy and HR skills. Frankly, too many principals are selected because they are compliant to the EDs and micro-manage their teachers into high results in NAPLAN to please the ED, as that is the measure of success. This ignores many other factors in child development. Frankly, and perhaps because of a diminishing pool …. the compliant, all-talk and no sophisticated action people get and keep the jobs. That's also about the intelligence and capacity of the EDs. Some of them shouldn't be in their jobs either.*

*While the role of the Principal is not seen as a leader of a business it is very much that. The concept of leading the teaching and learning as the main responsibility hasn't been a valid statement for 15 years in secondary schools. It is the intentional leadership structures and recruitment strategies that impact on the leading of the teaching and learning. I imagine that non-government principals are more business leaders than learning leaders. I still choose to teach when I can to keep connected to the students and see how they are changing (informing my other decisions) but I am aware that my colleagues mostly do not do this. The main pressure I experience that prevents me from being in classrooms and working to improve staff performance is the administrivia I receive from the LET and corporate office. The process of dealing with vexatious complaints and vexatious staff needs to change to support rather than undermine principals.*

*It all comes down to resourcing. I feel that if all schools could be funded 1.0 Principal, 1.0 Deputy, 1.0 Wellbeing Leader and 1.0 inclusive Education Leader. That this would provide the starting point for real change in our schools irrespective of category or complexity. If this was a base line for all schools then change could be effected and work load distributed and student and staff needs met. 2. Dealing with aggressive/abusive parents should not be done at the principal level and should always be done from a departmental level so as to help preserve relationships at the local level. The fact that Principals are directed by EDs and IMS to communicate with abusive parents is placing Principal wellbeing at risk. Communication coming from higher up in the Dept to aggressive and abusive parents would be amazing.*

### Distributed leadership

*Too much of our role is spent as business administrators, we need a business manager who is expert in managing the facilities and finances, this should be a professional role. Principals would then be leading the teaching staff and the learning.*

*Most sites are complex so middle leadership is important.*

*The positive impact of sufficient, high-quality leaders supporting the Principal in the role is key. With these in place the role becomes workable as long as Principals are willing to trust the leaders as we expect to be trusted by the system and our Line Managers.*

*Middle management is killing schools.*

### HR structural and policy options

*Principals need more SSO assistance to take on the admin tasks. We need the authority to employ teachers and to be able to offer permanent teachers a path to change schools*

*Explore the Executive Principal concept e.g., clusters of schools under an Executive Principal*

*A principal position that covers 3-4 Schools with a focus of purpose, coherence and clarity of vision to improve school and student performance.*

*Reconceptualising or splitting the principal role could impact our effectiveness and efficiency. By reorganising the responsibilities into 1. being a principal or teaching and learning and the 2. being the principal of organisation would help to better align a school's goals and objectives.*

*Shared leadership, two people sharing the role, older mentoring of newer person in the position.*

*Don't reconceptualise by making principal positions permanent. Have a think about having a 7 year tenure + 3year option, but not permanent. Or stick with the current appointment processes and have a clear, consistent and independently assessed rollover mechanism.*

*The work demand has increased incredibly and has become stressful to the point where it is not as satisfying as previously where Principals were valued and provided with support. Principals wear far too many hats and in particular in schools in categories 5, don't receive the funding required to expand leadership teams. Reclassifications should also be looked at much more regularly and be fair. Not all category levels are consistent in my opinion.*

*Assigning executive assistants / business managers to administrative teams in all settings to reduce red tape and administrative burden for principals*

*Schools need highly skilled Business Managers who are trained (and paid accordingly) to manage the facilities and finances of sites. This would make a HUGE difference.*

*Looking at the salary and conditions in the private sector, public school principals may start voting with their feet and defecting to the other systems.*

*Increase tenures to greater than 5 years, perhaps 10 years as change takes time and stability is crucial in schools.*

*Reframing and rethinking the principal / Educational Director line management relationship.*

*Restructure the role of PAC.*

*A better understanding of a preschool based principal. Take away performance management of principals, particularly in small schools and small communities. Higher level of support and incentive recruiting staff to category one country schools.*

### Workload, sustainability and wellbeing

*Workload is the most challenging aspect of the role.*

*This is such a critical and complex role. I don't think most people, inside and outside of schools, understand the pressures we are under. From my experience principals need exceptional personal assistants to help them manage the sheer workload and the competing priorities of their daily work, in order to cope. Valuing and raising the profile of the principal may help with retention. And yes, we should be paid double!*

*I think acknowledging the reality that principals are employed on teacher conditions (ie teacher holidays) but work through many of the holidays because they need to / have to. This is an industrial relations issue. Long hours per week is one matter. Not being able to recover adequately during holidays is another. Is it time to be open and transparent about principal holiday entitlement?*

*The job is seriously too hard – I am proud of what I am doing but literally wonder how long I can survive the pace. I continue to watch my health and wellbeing declining. Quarantine / guarantee a genuine holiday break of say 6-8 weeks and compensate them accordingly through improved salary?*

*This is a challenging and stressful profession. Redeveloping the role for the future to protect the wellbeing of Principals and strengthening their belief that have regular successes is really critical. I think a lot of us go home at night and wake up in the middle of the night with very mixed feelings about our work.*

*I am generally very happy and grateful in this role.*

*Facilities, WHS and HR demands need to be reduced or handled by Dept.*

*Workload is absolutely not sustainable.*

*I would like to have the opportunity for there to be a complaint line for Principals, where we can complain about problematic parents and the department deals with them. This year a large portion of my time has been spent dealing with parents, answering ministerial complaints (which take considerable time). At this time parents can make a complaint about silly things and I have to spend my valuable time for example on dog poo, or suspending a student who has been extremely violent. It is a waste of my time to have to deal with the administrative burden behind these complaints. I just want to do my job, get into classrooms, work with students and teachers.*

*System inequity and HR shortages impact on my staff wellbeing which impacts on my wellbeing. This needs to be acknowledged.*

*I'm fortunate to be working in a Cat 6 school, previously in Cat4, 2 & 1. Had I not ended up here I would have answered very differently about my job satisfaction and whether I would still be doing this job. In my previous schools the position was extremely challenging, and not one I could sustain for several years.*

*The current role needs to be reconceptualised. I currently work on average 70 hours per week.*

*Something needs to change or there will be no Principals left to run schools.*